ミミズクと夜の王
紅玉いづき
電撃文庫

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First Edition

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About This Book

MIMIZUKU TO YORU NO OU (ミミズクと夜の王, Mimizuku and the King of Night) is a light novel by Kougyoku Izuki, and happens to be her first work. It won the Grand Prize in the 13th Dengeki Novel Contest. The book is a stand-alone work, but the author has also written a continuation volume entitled *Dokuhakihime to Hoshi no Ishi* (毒吐姫と星の石, The Poison-Breathing Princess and the Star Stone).

Story Synopsis

Mimizuku, a small girl with chains on her wrists and ankles and the numbers “332” branded onto her forehead, wanders into the Forest of Night seeking to be

eaten by a monster. However, when the ruler of the monsters, the mysterious and beautiful “King of Night,” refuses to eat her, she tries to formulate a way to convince him otherwise.

General Information

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Prologue

The Forest of Night

THE WIND WOUND ITS WAY through the trees, cutting through the air like a scythe, making Mimizuku[1]'s heart seem cold with fear. The heaviness that could be felt in the surrounding could be described in one word: darkness. However, it was not complete darkness. The gaping wide moons hovering in the night sky above seemed almost too bright, as if it were a lie. But their moonlight made the colors in the darkness glow more richly. In the day, the forest was a luxuriant green, but in the darkness it seemed as though it were squirming about, like wriggling tentacles tangled amongst each other.

[1] "Mimizuku" means "horned owl."

"—Ugh!"

Mimizuku let out a yelp as she felt a sharp pain. Looking at the back of her hand, she saw a red horizontal line running through it. She had been cut. Her bare feet and shoulders also had numerous wounds crisscrossing through them.

"Ehehe…"

Mimizuku laughed faintly and licked the back of her hand. She tasted blood. It had a salty tinge to it when it touched her tongue, but then turned dimly sweet. *Human skin is kind of yummy*, Mimizuku thought. *I wonder if it would be nice to eat.* As she thought to herself, the trees and leaves of the forest swept across her skin and opened up new wounds.

Having all these cuts makes me feel so warm.

She was happy. After all, it was better to be warm than cold. *It's okay. It's okay.*

At that moment, a quick gust blew, and Mimizuku's brittle hair rustled like withered grass. It was a strange wind. Though it caused her short hair to dance about, the leaves of the trees did not make any

sound at all. With sanpaku[2] eyes and pupils like pebbles of coal, she looked upwards toward the direction of the wind.

Those moons…

There they both were, a perfect pair.

Ripping massive holes through the heavens, they seemed like a pair of eyes themselves.

They stared at Mimizuku.

Looking up through the forest, Mimizuku wondered what they would look like from the top of a tree.

They're so pretty.

She felt a shiver down her spine. Magnificent. If she were any shorter, she wouldn't have been able to see them at all. Despite this, the poor view she had of them now was enough to paralyze her. Mimizuku lifted her cheeks with her hands and gave a little chuckle. It was almost like a handsome guy was gazing upon her. But it wasn't a man.

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[2] Sanpaku: Literally "three whites." Check Wikipedia for more information.

Not a human, it's different. Different from a human… Well, whatever it is, I hope it's something that would eat me.

She lifted her hand and tried to touch the moons, but there was no way she could reach. It was okay though, because the moons were places no human could reach.

"Hey, up there, you pretty moons!" Mimizuku screamed as loud as her tiny lungs could muster.

"Can you… Won't you eat me?!"

The two moons began to sway back and forth. Mimizuku's heart began to beat faster.

"Leave, human."

A resonant, thunderous voice shook the darkness to its roots.

Hearing the voice made Mimizuku happy, and she made a large, cheeky grin.

I'm so happy, she thought.

"Leave. I dislike humans."

Dislike. Hate. It hates humans. *We'll get along*.

Even though she had the body of a human, Mimizuku hated humans as well. The moons, the lake, the acorns among other things, she hated them too, but not nearly as much as the humans.

"It's all right! I'm different from a human."

She opened her arms out as wide as she could. The shackles chained to her wrists jangled as she did.

"I'm livestock! So eat me!" Mimizuku said, making another wide, cheeky grin. The darkness whispered, and the moons twinkled.

Chapter 1

The Suicidal Mimizuku and the Human-Hating King of Night

MIMIZUKU AWOKE TO THE SOUND OF BIRDS chirping off in the distance. The light unexpectedly entered her eyes, and she blinked several times.

"Are you awake? Are you awake? Human child. Human girl."

Little by little, a voice filled her ears. Its speech was broken, and it was very hard to understand.

Human girl.

Like a reflex, Mimizuku relaxed the muscles around her mouth and let a laugh slip out.

"I'm not a human. I'm Mimizuku," she answered hazily, as if responding to the voice of a dream.

"Oh."

She then heard a rustling noise, like the wings of a bat.

"Are you not going to scream? Astounding. I know the mannerisms of humans well."

"Scream?" Pushing the palms of her hands against her eyes, she repeated the word, like a parrot.

"For not shrieking just from seeing me: I commend you," the voice said as Mimizuku lifted her head and grasped the shape of its origin.

However, the distance between the voice's origin and her sanpaku eyes was so small that the creature's body looked larger than any of the huge surrounding tree trunks. She took in the blackish-blue hue of its body, which obstructed her entire field of vision. It had two straight wings like a bat, and its body looked somehow human, however its torso was extremely muscular, and from each side of its body sprang two thin, prominent arms. Two milky white horns stuck out from its forehead, and its mouth was split straight across like a nutcracker. In its mouth were a set of yellowed teeth, between which protruded a red

tongue. The sheer redness of its mouth stood out quite flamboyantly. It had a mane of hair like maize leaves, and its eyes were such that the direction in which they were pointing was impossible to determine from looking at them.

It was certainly a frightening, fantastic figure. However, Mimizuku did not think it was so scary. She had never been scared of anything before.

"…Are you a monster?" Mimizuku asked, slightly tilting her neck to the side. "I am," the strange figure nodded, its voice shaking the air.

Mimizuku, with no change in attitude, asked, "Will you eat me?"

"I will not eat you." An instant reply.

"Awww… how disappointing…" she tapered off.

The beautiful creature she saw last night wouldn't eat her, and now this monster, which looked like it would be more willing to eat her, refused to do so as well.

"Human girl. Do you wish to be eaten?"

"Yes! Yes, I do! But hey! I'm no human girl, I'm Mimizuku, MI-MI-ZU-KU." She threw her arms and legs into the air like a child having a tantrum, causing the shackles on them to shake and jangle. "Why? Why? Why won't you eat me?" Mimizuku punched the monster's tough skin several times in protest. However, Mimizuku was weak, and the monster didn't budge in the slightest. Then, he arched his back, and suddenly flapped away.

"Huh?"

Mimizuku watched as the monster's form became more or less the size of a chicken, and his true, modest height became clear to her. The monster shook his body and, flapping his wings, flew up into the sky. He looked down at Mimizuku so that their eyes met. Their conversation continued.

"The Ieri in this forest never eat humans. Even now, as you ask me to eat you, I refuse." Mimizuku suddenly went still. Ieri. She had heard that somewhere before. Somewhere deep in her memory were humans who also called the monsters Ieri. With his

broken way of speaking, the monster could not make Mimizuku understand his explanation. Though she understood the words, his accent made them seem to her like words from the language of some far-off country.

Like words she had never heard before.

"Why?"

It was because the monster was much smaller than Mimizuku, of course. She would probably be far too much for him to eat. But Mimizuku remembered the much larger monster she had seen, who was just the right size to devour someone like her. She asked this monster about him.

"Because, because because. You met the King of Night," the monster responded. "I cannot associate with any person which the King of Night has let go of."

"King of Night?"

"Yes, the King of Night. He who possesses the moon-eyes, he is the absolute governor of this forest."

His manner of speech betrayed deep reverence for the one whom he was speaking of. Mimizuku raised her head upon hearing his words.

"Oh, him, the one with the pretty moon eyes!" She grinned as she spoke. Eyes like the moon. There was no mistaking it. They had twinkled just like the real things. Mimizuku could still remember.

"What's with that guy?"

"He did not eat you?"

"Nope."

No matter how many times she had told him, he wouldn't eat her, so she eventually fell asleep at the roots of a nearby tree. She was able to sleep well among the scents of dirt and water wafting from the ground.

"If the case is that, then in this forest, this forest of night, there is no monster who will let you be eaten by them," the monster declared.

"I see…" Mimizuku nodded. She didn't really understand why though. In any case, if that big guy wouldn't eat her, then it didn't seem like any of the

other monsters would be willing to, either. But that was bad. She had gone through so much trouble coming all the way here.

"Well then, I'm just gonna have to get eaten by him somehow." Still unsteady from just waking, Mimizuku tottered back and forth as she stood up. But it seemed like she had shared her sleeping area with a number of others, as the blood in her legs was congested, and they were blue and numb. She tumbled back onto the roots like a fruit falling from a branch.

"What are you doing?"

"Eh, I think I'll sleep a little longer. You don't mind, do you?"

"It is your choice, but…"

The monster fluttered down and stopped right before Mimizuku's eyes.

"Young lady, you are strange."

"Strange? Maybe I am, but don't call me 'young lady.' My name's Mimizuku…"

"Mimizuku. That is the name of a nocturnal bird."

"Yeah, that's right."

"It is a good name."

Mimizuku, clearly flattered, let out a little giggle. *Have I ever felt this happy?* she thought to herself.

"Mr. Monster, what's your name?"

"——*——"

"Huh? Sorry, can you say that again?"

"It is no use. Human ears cannot grasp the name of an Ieri."

"Well then… what should I call you?"

"Call me whatever it is you like. Do all humans name themselves after animals that they like?" The monster crossed his arms.

"Um…"

He's not a human, though, Mimizuku thought. She pondered for a bit, but not too deeply, before she gave a cheeky grin and said,

"Okay, I got it. How about 'Kuro'?"

"'Kuro'? The color of night…" Kuro nodded. His acceptance of the name made Mimizuku happy. Smiling, she raised the upper half of her body.

"Mimizuku. The grass is cutting you and causing your blood to flow out." Kuro reached out with his bottom-left arm and felt Mimizuku's cheek. Mimizuku, covered in mud and cuts, simply responded with an "Oh, is that so?" If she touched her wounds, bacteria would enter and definitely cause an infection. She knew that much. But it was all right.

Grabbing onto a nearby branch, Kuro swung onto Mimizuku's head. It was strange; she couldn't feel his weight on her head at all.

"Mimizuku."

"Hm?"

"These numbers on your forehead, are they a magic spell?"

"Oh, those?" Mimizuku gave her forehead a couple of cheerful pats. Peeking out from behind the bangs of her tawny hair were three numbers.

"I'm number three hundred thirty two," Mimizuku truthfully responded.

"What does that mean?"

"It's my number."

"Okay. But I do not understand." Kuro's response was also truthful.

"Are you angry?"

"I am not really angry, no," Kuro answered quietly. As ever, Mimizuku's heart began to beat faster.

Am I dreaming? she thought for a moment. It felt strange from the very beginning. Kuro's words were words she had never heard before.

Just a little strange.

"Hey, Kuro, it's strange somehow."

"What is strange?"

"Why, are you being so nice to me?" Mimizuku asked as she stepped barefoot through the grass and the foliage. The skin on the bottoms of her feet was becoming tougher, even a pointed stone wouldn't have been able to cut them.

"I am nice?" Kuro replied contrarily.

"Yes! You're very nice," Mimizuku said, cracking a hearty smile. The chains around her ankles became tangled in the roots of a tree, and her footing became unsteady.

"Gah!"

However, her face didn't hit the ground. Just before impact, a strange sound rang. Mimizuku, who was facing forward, rebounded like a spring, and tipped backward so much that it seemed like she would fall over the other way.

"W-W-Waah!"

She regained her posture in a hurry.

Somehow, she had been saved. She didn't really understand what had happened, but there was a sound like grumbling in her ears.

"I believe such an action could be considered 'kind.'" Kuro was laughing.

"Just now, was that you, Kuro?"

"Aye. It was indeed!"

"Why?" Stopping her feet, eyes upturned, she looked at Kuro. She could only see a bit of Kuro's wings in her field of vision.

"Do I need a reason? I see, humans are those sorts of creatures." To those words, Mimizuku slowly

shook her head, being careful not to jeopardize Kuro's balance.

"I suppose Mimizuku does not understand the matters of people. I would like to know why as well. If there is a certain way in which one must be kind, I would like to hear it." Mimizuku heard the grumbling sound again. It seemed like that was Kuro's laughter. It hurt her ears.

Suddenly fluttering down from Mimizuku's head, Kuro appeared before her eyes and spoke.

"I want knowledge."

"Knowledge?"

"I like to know things. No matter how many books I read, I simply cannot demystify humans. You are a human. Thus, it would please me to observe you." Mimizuku blinked emotionlessly a few times and thought about Kuro's words.

How does he read with eyes like that?

Whatever.

Kuro wants to know about humans. Mimizuku is a human. It's because I'm a human that Kuro is being nice to me.

Mimizuku groaned as she pondered.

I think I'll stop saying to Kuro that I'm not a human.

"Kuro! I get it! I understand! That's surprising…"

"Hoho. What has Mimizuku understood?" Kuro asked with interest, returning to Mimizuku's head.

"Even if I'm a human, there are still people who will accept me. It's kind of strange." She walked forward. She lifted her feet with each step so as to not get the shackles above her feet caught in anything. From above her head came the sound of feathers flapping.

"I am not a human, but… you are truly a strange one." Kuro spoke with a brooding, ponderous tone.

"Ehehe…" Mimizuku laughed.

She felt very happy.

The forest called "The Forest of Night" was awash with foliage, and the drifts of leaves blowing in the wind made it seem as if the forest was sobbing

convulsively. Occasionally, a sound like a bird flapping its wings could be heard, but when Mimizuku looked up, no animal presence could be seen. From afar, Mimizuku thought she could hear the sound of someone breathing, but she could never see any other monsters anywhere.

It was Kuro who volunteered to guide Mimizuku, who would have otherwise walked alone. Mimizuku felt a great surprise at this, but she had no way of expressing her feelings in words.

With Kuro on her head, she proceeded through the forest. The shackles at her feet made a loud jingling noise as she walked.

"There aren't many other monsters here, huh…"

For a forest that was supposed to be full of monsters, it was very different from what she had imagined it to be. She let out a sigh.

"It is because of the path you are taking," Kuro said from atop her head. "During the day, Ieri do not usually come to the riverbank."

"I see…"

As she walked along the side of the river, she swayed left and right. Suddenly, she kneeled down and put her hands into the water. Feeling the coldness of the running water, she rubbed her hands in it several times to wash them. The forest waterway flowed melancholically, and the water was incredibly transparent.

Then, without moving her face forward, Mimizuku splashed the river's water across her head.

Kuro fluttered backward in a panic.

"Mi-Mimizuku!"

"Ahh…"

Mimizuku raised her soaked face and bangs.

"Oh, sorry Kuro," Mimizuku said in monotone while wiping her mouth with rough, sweeping gestures. "Uugh, my face hurts!" Mimizuku scowled.

"What? But did you not drink water?"

"Yeah, I did."

"If the water is seeping into your wounds, maybe it would be best to scoop it out."

Mimizuku then stared fixedly at her own hand. The hand was dangling because of weakened muscles, and it was still sparkling wet from being washed.

"Hm?"

She squeezed it and let go several times.

"Yeah…"

Tilting her neck slightly to the side, Mimizuku suddenly stood up.

"All right Kuro! Let's go!"

Kuro mumbled an affirmation and flew back on top of Mimizuku's head. Seemingly forgetting about what they were just talking about, Mimizuku began to speak about something else.

"So, where is the 'King of Night?'"

"Straight along this way…"

Kuro rustled his wings and looked at Mimizuku.

"Do you really want to go to him, Mimizuku?"

"Do I really what?" Mimizuku responded, not understanding Kuro at all.

"You said that he told you to leave. If you expose yourself to his sight again, you can no longer consider

yourself alive. When you incite his outrage, you might be turned to ash in an instant, or dissolved into water."

"Could I get eaten?"

Light filling her murky sanpaku eyes, Mimizuku truly wished that she would be eaten.

Kuro stared at her motionlessly for a moment, and then raised his upper right arm.

"It is your choice. If that is what you want, then you may go, Mimizuku. If the opportunity arises. If fate allows it, if the world allows it. It may also be that we meet again."

"Aren't you going too, Kuro?"

Kuro laughed at Mimizuku's question.

"I have not been called for."

Is that how it works? Mimizuku thought. *Maybe so.*

So he can't go if he isn't called upon. I think I know what he means. Mimizuku smiled.

"Well then, I'm gonna go."

The forest opened up its gaping green mouth. However, Mimizuku didn't think it was scary. Alone, she stepped forward into the forest.

Leaving Kuro behind, Mimizuku proceeded into the forest unhesitatingly, her shackles ringing as she went. She didn't find it disheartening that Kuro could not accompany her anymore. After all, she had traveled the long road to the forest all by herself. All that time, Mimizuku wished to be alone.

She walked forward, jangling her shackles. When she arrived at a wall of vines entwined around some trees, she forced her way through them and suddenly arrived in a large, open area.

"Waah…" Mimizuku let out involuntarily.

In the middle of the forest, there was a huge, run down mansion. However, that was a not what stole Mimizuku's eye. In front of its door was a pitch-black wing, smoother and more beautiful than a crow's. With a relaxed motion, it swayed upward.

There, Mimizuku came face to face with the King of Night for the first time.

The strains of sunlight breaking through the crevices of greenery revealed the form of the monster called the “King.”

Mimizuku let out an involuntary yelp. Her teeth chattered meagerly, and her body shivered as if paralyzed. It wasn’t fear. It wasn’t trepidation. She didn’t know of those things. The pathways of nerves in her brain had long since been rewired against those feelings.

“Ah…” Opening her mouth halfway, unable to utter a word, she simply let out a small sound.

“Ah…”

What do I say? What should I say?

That’s right. I have to tell him to eat me.

She had to say it.

“Why have you come?”

The King of Night’s thin lips barely moved as he spun his cold words. His voice was frank and sharp, like an unsheathed blade.

Being stared at by those eyes, with that glare that would have frozen any normal person solid with terror, Mimizuku only received a slight jolt of surprise.

Ohhh?

The eyes sparkled.

They're silver.

Just like the moons from the night before, the King of Night's eyes now glittered in that silvery white color.

The color of the moon, Mimizuku thought. *The color of the moon, in broad daylight.*

It was different from how she remembered it, but not so much that she could mistake it for something else. Before her were surely the two small moons, shining the same light as they had before.

"So pretty…"

She let out a little gasp. Hearing it, the King of Night made an unpleasant scowl. Complicated tattoo-like patterns extended from his eyes to his cheeks.

It's beautiful, Mimizuku thought.

"Leave. Go back to your own place. Human girl." His words betrayed murderous intent.

Even so, Mimizuku did not hesitate in her response.

"I don't have any place to go back to," she said loudly. No one had raised his or her voice in opposition to the King of Night before.

"I don't have any place to go back to. From the very beginning, I've never had a place I could call home!"

Because they would hit her. Because they would do nothing to her but cause her pain. Mimizuku wanted so much not to think of that place as home.

Mimizuku wanted to think that it would be better to return to any place but that one.

"Hey! Don't call me a human! I'm Mimizuku! My name's Mimizuku!" She yelled it out to the point that she became dizzy. She was used to it by now, but she felt unsteady.

Her knees gave way, and she fell kneeling onto the ground.

"Hey, eat me."

Her vision gradually began to go gray. *Do I have to sleep?* she thought. She wanted to continue entreating the King to eat her, but her body wouldn't do as she told it to. *I have to sleep.*

Your body has suffered much, and you must sleep. Someone was speaking to her.

Ooooh… This is strange… I wish I could drink some water…

"Please… eat me… King of… Night…"

Mimizuku toppled over on the grass supinely, arms extended out. The two midday moons looked toward her.

"I beg you… Please eat me…"

The shackles on her arms grew heavy, and her arms fell to the ground.

Oh, those white moons, the King of Night's eyes are so beautiful, was all Mimizuku could think of as a drowsiness that made her feel like she was sinking into a swamp assailed her. She closed her eyelids.

No… I want to open my eyes again, Mimizuku thought, her consciousness fading. It was strange. Whenever she went to sleep, she would usually hope that she never woke up again.

If I could just see those two moons once more, I don't care if I ever open my eyes again.

» » » » » » »

Feeling as though someone was calling her name, Mimizuku gently lifted her eyelids.

The sky was red with the sunset. The moment she comprehended the thought, something came fluttering down from above.

"Gyah!"

She unthinkingly croaked like a frog.

Propping her upper body forward, she looked at the thing that had come from the sky. Upon seeing it, her eyes almost literally popped out.

There were chocolate-vines and crimson morning glory vines among other fresh fruits she had never

seen before. They all plopped down like a mountain falling from the sky in front of Mimizuku.

She gaped and looked upward. Flapping before her against the light red sky was Kuro. He was at a distance where he seemed large enough that Mimizuku could easily hug him.

"Kuro!" Mimizuku yelled. She then tried to move her arms, but was overcome by a confusing feeling.

"Eh, ah, what's this?" Mimizuku asked Kuro, pointing at the fruits burying her.

"Why, it is just what it looks like."

Kuro tossed a live fish into the air with both of his upper arms, cut its tail so that it was the same size as him, and placed it down his pomegranate-like mouth. He swallowed it whole, and then he spoke.

"Might you be hungry? Mimizuku."

"Eh, eh, eh?"

Mimizuku was incredibly confused.

"Hm? Are these… for me?" She pointed to the fruits.

"Yes. I wonder if humans could do with fish?" Kuro flew down beside Mimizuku, grabbed a tree branch, and used it to spear a fish.

He drew several circles in the air with it in a splendid fashion, and the fish was suddenly engulfed in flame. Mimizuku was surprised and taken aback, but the fire just as soon grew calmer, and a savory aroma began to hang in the air. Strangely, the tree branch didn't seem the slightest bit singed. Seeing the results, Kuro nodded, satisfied.

"Here." He held the fish out to Mimizuku.

"H-Huh?"

She received it gratefully. However, Mimizuku did not entirely grasp what was happening, and she seemed to still be in a dreamlike state. Despite not understanding, she put the fish into her mouth. Her instincts taking over, she greedily devoured it. The inside was somewhat rare, but the flavor didn't matter to Mimizuku. Whatever she could eat was good enough for her.

Have I eaten something like this before? The thought seemed to sweep over the back of her head.

"Tell me one thing Mimizuku. Does a dead fish not try to run away?" Kuro asked, rustling his wings. Mimizuku listened as she ate the whole fish, all the way to the eyes, grinding the meat to shreds in her mouth.

"Hey, Kuro. Why are you here?" Mimizuku looked around the vicinity. She was still in front of the King of Night's mansion. The King himself, however, had gone off somewhere, as she couldn't see him anywhere.

"Hmph," Kuro responded. He crossed his upper arms. "It is hard for me to say as well."

He then flew back up into the air and tapped on Mimizuku's head.

"Fate has given you leave. Was it nocturnal luminescence that allowed you to make it? Indeed, it is hard to say. That is why I must ask you, Mimizuku."

Mimizuku blinked a few times.

"Not discounting death, do you wish to remain here? Mimizuku."

"Eh, is it really all right if I stay?" Mimizuku spoke in a loud, joyful voice. "Hey, Kuro! Is it really all right for me to stay?"

"I will not promise any good to come of it. You might be killed tomorrow. Is that okay with you?"

Mimizuku smiled at Kuro's words and flopped onto the ground once again.

Having eaten so much food so quickly, her stomach was starting to ache.

"You know, Kuro…" Mimizuku smiled and held out her arms. Her shackles rang as if singing.

"My only happiness would come from being eaten by the King of Night," said Mimizuku, chuckling happily.

And then, the suicidal horned owl sighed gently.

"Ah, I could die happily like that."

Mimizuku smiled.

"Hmph." Kuro gave a slight nod. "You are quite miserable," he sighed.

Mimizuku didn't understand his words, so she just laughed cursorily.

"Hey, Kuro."

"What, Mimizuku?"

"The King of Night is beautiful, isn't he?" Mimizuku said happily.

Kuro was unsure of how to respond.

"Of course. He is a king, after all."

Mimizuku let out a chuckle at his words again.

The curtain of night spread across the forest of monsters.

Oh, the King of Night's eyes have changed to gold, Mimizuku thought absentmindedly, straining her eyes at the heavens.

So this is what happiness is like.

Chapter 2

The Threshold of Blessings

AN OLD MAN EXTENDED BOTH OF HIS ARMS out as far as he could, neither one reaching the end of a large window. As he opened it, beams of sunlight rushed into the room and struck the red carpet.

In a wide, open room decorated with luxurious paintings, two men sat facing each other.

"Check."

With a light thud, the younger man moved the white bishop with his long finger across the board.

The light from the sun and the reflections from the massive chandelier above made his hair shine a brilliant gold. His body gave an impression of fear-

lessness, but his eyes were gentle and blue, not changed since his boyhood.

He was seated in a well-fashioned chair facing a gray haired man who was just entering his old age.

The man moved his eyes, whose colors were somewhat faded, across the top of the board. He moved the shaved marble black rook across the board, taking the bishop without so much as a shiver.

"On that subject, tell me, does the rumor that Zai Gearn's principality and Sechiria have formed an alliance hold any ground?" the young man asked, moving his pawn out of range.

"From whom did you hear that?" the older man asked, not lifting his gaze from the chessboard.

"From a traveler from Sechiria I spoke with at the bar the other day. It seems like Gardalsia has opened its ports. They're prospering quite well over there," the young man said with a whistle. The old man heaved a sigh upon hearing his words. He moved his rough, wizened finger toward his knight, advancing it forward.

"That's a check."

The young man skillfully utilized his queen to avoid defeat.

"Sechiria is well sustained, eh?"

"It's because of their army. They're not very numerous, but they're the best of the best. Surrender for them was a difficult thing," the old man said solemnly. The wrinkles at the roots of his eyebrows gave the impression of old age.

"Another one falls to Zai Gearn," the young man said to himself. He lifted his face and smiled. As he did, he gave a youthful impression.

"So, I hear that Lord Zeliade's son was born yesterday. They were making a fuss over whether or not we would be holding a celebration."

"So the Lady Zeliade is safe as well?"

"Yes. Mother and son are both in good health."

"That is what's most important, is it not?" the old man said. The space between his eyebrows was carved with wrinkles.

I wish he would look a little more cheerful sometimes, the young man thought, giving an uncomfortable smile.

The old man placed his fingertip on his king and moved it, but he shivered with hesitation.

"How is Claudius?"

The young man raised his head suddenly at this question, coughing slightly in order to not appear rude.

"Why are you asking me? I'm not his father, you know."

"If I go myself, he'll act like there's nothing wrong." As he spoke, the old man's tone of voice seemed to deteriorate.

"Yeah, all right," the young man said, deciding to put up with it. He let out a laugh. "He's fine. So long as I saw him, at least." He then moved his knight, slightly pivoting it as he slid it across the board. "That's checkmate."

In his moment of downfall, the old man stared wide-eyed at his king.

He scanned the board over and over to find where he could have slipped up, but no matter how he looked at it, it seemed to be a perfect loss. He heaved a sigh and stood up, placing his hand against the back of his chair for support.

"Ann Duke… Don't think you're getting away with winning against the king of your own country."

The young man called Ann Duke put the pieces away and stood up. And then, he laughed.

"Your Majesty, surely you must allow your country's poster knight at least a bit of credit?" Ann Duke said jokingly.

The king's eyes became serious.

"If I may bring it to your attention, poster knight of Red Ark, have you thought about the plan for the subjugation of the demon king?"

The young man's response was quick.

"Of course not! Something like that would be such a pain."

Ann Duke waved his hand flutteringly and said, "Well then, you should get back to your kingdom's af-

fairs, Your Majesty. If we mess around anymore, you'll get stuck having to listen to the cabinet minister's preaching." He laughed and opened the large, oak door to leave.

The man left in the room heaved a deep breath.

"It was startling to hear that from the Holy Knight. Damn him, that municipal housekeeper."

He gave one, great, spiteful sigh.

This was the district of Red Ark. It was a small land near the Forest of Night ruled by the king. This was the scene that the king saw from his private room in his castle.

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When nightfall came, Mimizuku awoke at the foot of a large tree.

After slumbering for a while, she crawled sluggishly to the nearby river and washed her face. The sunset had dyed the whole forest red. The sun had al-

ready disappeared, and the bitter oranges in the vicinity shone like embers.

Mimizuku saw her face reflected in the river.

Thanks to the influence of the light, her face looked a bit like it was covered in blood. She was, as usual, horribly emaciated, but her cheekbones didn't seem to stick out much.

About once every two days, Kuro would bring Mimizuku food. He told her to call him anytime she needed help, but the need had never arisen. Looking around, the forest was overflowing with things to eat, and the things that Kuro would bring her were more than enough anyway. In fact, she would often vomit from overeating.

Energetic, she splashed the river's water into her face, washing her mouth while she was at it.

Her bangs became soaked in the process, and they began to drip. On her forehead reflected in the water, she saw the numbers there, just as they had always been.

The drops of water dripping from her bangs made the numbers shimmer.

Seeming to remember something, Mimizuku closed her eyes. She had already slept for a long time though, so she wasn't able to fall back asleep.

Finally, she lifted her head, and, shackles ringing, she stood up and walked forward.

Mimizuku didn't have anything to do in this forest. Before she came to the forest, she would work from morning to night, sometimes even straight through the night, so it was normal for her. Not doing anything was a strange feeling to her.

I'll go find him.

She had slept enough, and she wasn't hungry, so she wandered off the find the King of Night.

Since the forest was so huge, it was possible that she would find him, but it was also possible that she would never find him. She didn't have any kind of aim to go on from the beginning, so she searched as she would any other day, and hopefully she would find out something new.

A quiet place.

A place where it would seem like you're the only one alive in the world. A place where you couldn't hear anything but your own breath.

Above the trees.

Somewhere with water.

And therefore, a beautiful place.

So long as the King of Night was inside the forest, he would surely be in a place like that.

She didn't think to enter the mansion, as Kuro had told her not to. "*The King of Night will become upset if you do so, so do not enter the mansion*," he had said. So Mimizuku didn't enter. However, Kuro did not tell Mimizuku not to look for the King of Night.

Why wasn't she allowed to enter the mansion? Mimizuku couldn't imagine any reason.

Mimizuku continued to walk, her shackles jangling all the while. Finally, the surroundings grew dark, and the light of the moon gently, quietly shone across the forest.

Oh…

Mimizuku stopped. In the middle of the forest, there was a small, open area.

The area was horribly quiet. Nothing but the breathing of monsters lurking in the darkness could be heard. Mimizuku surveyed her surroundings.

"Oh!"

She yelped. It was a yelp of delight, however. On the thick, withered branch of a beech tree, there was the King of Night. Even though he heard Mimizuku's voice, he did not turn to look at her. From beneath, Mimizuku looked at his moon eyes, which had changed to a golden color.

They're pretty today as well.

She felt incredibly happy.

"Um… uh… Your Majesty…"

Just like before, she hesitated when she spoke. It was only the smallest faltering. However, she didn't know any other way.

"Your Majesty…"

Calling out to him, Mimizuku came up to the roots of the withered tree and plopped down. Since

the King of Night was not on a very tall tree this time, she could see him very well. It made her happy.

"Um, er… Uh…"

Mimizuku took a deep breath, and tried to come up with something to talk about. Because interfering with the King of Night was the only way.

First, she talked of work.

"I'll draw water."

It was work she was always made to do in the "village," however it was the first time she heard the words come from herself.

"Start a fire? Draw water? Bury trash? Hey. I'll do whatever you need."

Whatever. She could do whatever. It was all right. Since she would be dead any other way, she could do anything he wanted.

But the King of Night's response was simple.

"You're an eyesore."

With his low voice, his moon eyes. He treated Mimizuku like a pebble at the side of the road.

It's okay, I'm used to it.

She had always been treated that way. It was all right. However, there was something strange. Even though it was the same treatment, the King of Night was different from the people of the "village."

What was different?

"Hey, my name's Mimizuku. I came up with it myself," Mimizuku started to say for some reason. Even though she had been told she was an eyesore, she didn't feel as though she wanted to disappear. Unlike those times so long ago, the times in the "village," she didn't feel like fading away.

She felt like her words would mean something if she said them. The words from her mouth would reach someone's ears. She had a good feeling that the King of Night was this kind of someone. That was all there was to it.

"I wasn't always Mimizuku, you know… In the village, I did slave stuff, and before that, I don't remember anything. My name then was Mimizu[3]. I also got

[3] Mimizu (蚯蚓): earthworm

called stuff like ‘demon’ and ‘crap.’ With a name like ‘Mimizu’, they said to me ‘do you know earthworms, do you? they eat mud, so eat it too’ and got mud flung at me and stuff. Of course, I couldn’t eat any of it…”

Mimizuku cackled shrilly.

And she continued to laugh.

“That’s why I put the ‘ku’ on the end of Mimizu, and I called myself ‘Mimizuku.’ But that doesn’t means I eat earthworms either[4]…”

Realizing how strange her own words sounded, Mimizuku laughed. She laughed to the point that her cheek muscles cramped.

“…Foolish.”

A voice suddenly arose. It made Mimizuku’s shoulders jolt up, and she raised her head.

The light of the moon was behind the King of Night, so Mimizuku couldn’t see his facial expression. However, she was aware that those golden eyes were looking in her direction.

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[4] She didn’t eat mud being Mimizu (an earthworm), so she says she doesn’t eat earthworms now being Mimizuku (an owl)

She felt her spine tingle.

It was pleasurable to the point of paralysis.

The King of Night then continued to speak.

"You only added the 'ku' of your suffering[5]. You were most likely better off wherever you were."

Mimizuku blinked several times. She didn't know what to do. So she simply smiled powerlessly.

"Hm?"

She relaxed her facial muscles and became a little more at ease. She waved her head left and right.

"Do you mean troubles like suffering? Who cares? If it's pretty, I'm happy. Even if you're suffering, isn't it better to be happy?" Mimizuku said without thinking much.

She stood up, making her shackles jingle, despite knowing that even if she reached out, she could never reach him.

"Hey, Your Majestyyyy—"

[5] Ku (苦): pain, suffering

"Girl who names beasts," the King of Night said, feeling strangely drawn in by Mimizuku. "You are not a monster. I, am not your king." His voice shook the very air around them.

Mimizuku, again failing to understand him, was simply confused. That was how it was, true. The King of Night had said something completely logical.

Mimizuku didn't think that she was a human. However, she also didn't think that she was a monster. She had been called a demon before, but that was a different case. Rather, Mimizuku wanted to become a monster. She felt that if she could become a monster, and always be at the king's side, it would be better than being a human. But she knew that this was something she could not do. There were many things she couldn't do, but she wasn't completely aware of what she could do.

"Um…"

That wasn't enough; she had to think some more. That is to say, she couldn't call the king "Your Majesty." After all, she wasn't a monster.

"Call me what you like."

Kuro's words surfaced into Mimizuku's head. She smiled to herself, and then spoke.

"All right then, Fukurou!" she said, holding out her index finger. "Fukurou! I'll call you Fukurou!"

Mimizuku and Fukurou. They were their own set[6]. Whether or not the King of Night rejected or accepted this, Mimizuku didn't really care.

She became aware that Fukurou was looking up. What did he see? What was he thinking? Whatever it was, she was probably thinking too much about it. After all, when Mimizuku lived in the "village," she would always stare up at the sky for no reason.

When she stopped thinking, time would stop.

It would be as if she had died.

She vacantly recalled the days of the past. Mimizuku's recollections of the "village" seemed to have fallen apart, and her memories were dim, as if her spirit from that time had drifted far, far away.

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[6] Mimizuku means "horned owl", and Fukurou (梟) means "owl"

"Hey. Hey, Fukurou," Mimizuku said in a whisper-like tone.

"Why… why won't you eat me?"

That's what she had come all this way for. Even though she hadn't wanted to take a single step anywhere, she came to the forest anyway in the hope that she would be eaten.

"Eat me… please…"

The branches above shifted about. Mimizuku raised her head. Pitch-black wings moved as if flapping several times.

Did he go?

That beautiful, beautiful King of Night.

"Don't go… Don't go…"

All of a sudden, two moons appeared before Mimizuku. Two moons. She felt as if her heart was going to stop. At the tip of her nose was Fukurou's elegant face.

His thin lips began to move.

"If I eat a human, I will surely throw them back up."

He then loudly flapped his wings.

Mimizuku blinked once, and in the next instant, the King of Night had disappeared into the darkness.

A single black feather fell to the ground.

Mimizuku, out of strength, sat down on the ground. She picked up the feather and held it with both of her hands, touching it to her lips.

"Something's not right…"

For some reason she couldn't understand, her chest felt tight.

"I'm not a human…"

The forest was quiet to the point that her ears began to hurt. Sitting in the darkness, she cast her eyes downward.

There was nothing she could do about the feeling in her chest. She wished she couldn't feel pain.

Rays of sunlight shone through the forest.

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"Hey, Kuro. What should I do to get eaten by Fukurou?" Mimizuku asked while Kuro ate one of the pomegranates he had brought.

Kuro rustled his feathers a bit. His stature small as usual, he was sitting down facing Mimizuku.

"Fukurou?" Kuro responded, confused.

"Oh yeah, it's the King of Night's name. Since I'm not a monster, I can't call him as if he were my king… That's why I thought of something to call him and came up with Fukurou."

"And you called the King of Night as such to his face?"

"Yep. That's what I called him."

"…I see."

Kuro crossed his upper and lower arms diagonally, and seemed to think for a moment.

"An owl king. Certainly, certainly. That may well do," he said as if groaning, lifting his face. "Mimizuku."

"Yeah?"

She then realized that no one had called her Mimizuku before. Kuro wasn't a human; he was in fact something more wonderful.

Kuro slowly continued to speak.

"It seems you are not quite aware yet. That is, to the fact that you have been made several allowances."

"Allowances?"

Mimizuku tilted her neck to the side.

"Aye." Kuro nodded.

"In that case, I recommend that you go to the mansion."

"Mansion? You mean Fukurou's? Is it really okay?"

"Normally it would not be allowed. However, you seem to be a preferred guest of his."

Kuro then flew straight up, reaching eye level with Mimizuku.

"However, if I am wrong, you may be killed. If these are truly allowances, however, then your case will change. Mimizuku. If you truly do not fear death as you said, then what have you to fear now?"

Kuro's words were difficult to understand, but Mimizuku got the gist of it.

That's right, from the very beginning, Mimizuku's goal was to be killed. It was her wish, more than anything, to be eaten. If that was the case, then she had no reason to hesitate at this point.

"All right, I'll go."

Carefree, she began to walk toward Fukurou's mansion, dropping her half-eaten pomegranate.

Mimizuku began to walk ahead, leaving Kuro behind, but she suddenly turned around.

"But Kuro, why're you telling me all this? Isn't Fukurou your king?"

Mimizuku figured that it would make Fukurou angry to have his monsters dislike him.

"Indeed. Indeed, you are right, Mimizuku," Kuro said, flapping his wings.

"I wish only good fortune upon the King of Night. However, who really knows?"

They were dramatic words, but Mimizuku couldn't understand what he meant.

"Who really knows? Where is this gentleman's blessing?"

If only happiness were that simple, Mimizuku thought.

Chapter 3

Purgatory Flowers

IF ONE GAVE THE DOOR of the worn down mansion a small push, it would creak open and usher whoever was summoned inside.

It was an incredibly large mansion. The skylight was closed, leaving the rest of the area shrouded in darkness. The room smelled of old dried trees.

Mimizuku twirled around, taking in the surroundings, and then began to climb a flight of creaky stairs.

She ran her fingertips across the handrail in the darkness but didn't feel any of the slightly rough sensation of dust, despite the railing seeming old enough to have already fully rotted.

She arrived at the top. At the end of a long hallway was a door that stood open slightly ajar. Bright light was leaking out from the opening. As if being drawn in, Mimizuku approached the door and swung it open.

"Waaah…"

Mimizuku's breath was stolen from her by what she saw.

A huge window was sprawled out before her.

The light in the room was completely off-balance compared to the rest of the Forest of Night.

The light shone upon the wall, which displayed an enormous drawing. Based mostly in greens and blues, it was an image of the Forest of Night. It was completely unrealistic, however just one look at it would allow one to recognize it as a masterpiece. Somehow, somehow, this large image was beautiful.

This is it.

As if she had received a divine revelation, Mimizuku suddenly understood.

This was as far as Fukurou could see.

How beautiful. How solemn, what infinite stillness. No matter where one looked, the world that Fukurou could see was beautiful. It was not the first time that Mimizuku had seen such a masterpiece. Back when Mimizuku was still in the "village," there was a masterpiece among objects pillaged by the villagers. The "village" was a village of thieves.

However, this picture was different from any other, as it was infinitely more beautiful. Whatever materials were used to draw it, they had a strange luster about them. They made it seem as though the image was alive.

Mimizuku outstretched her hand absentmindedly.

Just before her fingers would have come into contact with the surface of the image,

"Don't touch it."

The words seemed to cut through Mimizuku's body like a blade. Her shoulders shivered, and she turned around. Fukurou stood before her.

"Ah…"

"What are you doing?"

He made no effort to conceal his anger.

Mimizuku's spine trembled against her will. It was instinctual fear, something she had known since before she was born.

However, Mimizuku considered it insignificant. She was no longer afraid of anything.

"The picture, it's beautiful," she simply said. Even if Fukurou was angry, it didn't matter.

After all, if he killed and ate her, that would be all right.

Fukurou took a step towards Mimizuku, not making a sound as he moved his feet. Then, he extended his arm out as if to grab Mimizuku by the head.

If I die, I hope there isn't a trace of me left.

Mimizuku closed her eyes. As if multiple revolving lanterns had suddenly stopped moving, Mimizuku fell into complete darkness, and her consciousness quietly slipped away.

Her body feeling heavy and uncomfortable, Mimizuku raised her eyelids. Did she awaken because she felt so heavy, or did she feel heavy because she

had just awoken? When she opened her eyes, Kuro was staring back at her, his stature seeming large due to his proximity. She met eyes with Kuro, who seemed close to embracing her. Behind him was the same sprawling green of the forest. Fukurou's mansion was no longer there.

"Are you awake, Mimizuku?"

"Kuro?"

Mimizuku held out her arms, caressing the sides of Kuro's smooth skin.

"Mimizuku is… still alive?"

"That's right, isn't it?"

"He still would not eat you?"

"Seems that way."

Mimizuku bit her lip. It was no use again. She was filled with thoughts of regret and hopelessness. However, that wasn't all that she felt.

She lifted up her body and sat.

"Kuro, I saw Fukurou's drawing."

"Is that so?"

"It was beautiful."

"Is that so?"

That's right, it was beautiful. It was unthinkably beautiful.

"About the king's picture… The most truly beautiful thing is when he paints with red," said Kuro, displaying a rare moment of hesitation.

"Red? But he didn't have any. There was no red on his picture."

Mimizuku could remember the drawing clearly. It was full of beautiful greens and blues. It was just like the ever-transforming forest. *But what about the sunset?* Mimizuku thought.

Kuro nodded.

"Yes… Red cannot be obtained in this forest. The paints used by the King of Night are a special kind, filled with magical power. That is why they are so beautiful, because of that power."

Kuro spoke as if he were singing.

"However, it is difficult for Ieri to obtain the ingredients for red."

"Difficult? Why?" Mimizuku asked, her interest piqued.

"Mimizuku. Do you know of the flowers called 'Renka?'"

"Renka?"

"They are called the flowers of the purgatory, a species that grows deep, deep in this forest. They are colored crimson like blood. Its roots are extraordinary, and can be made into red paint."

"If they're in the forest, why don't you just go get them?" Mimizuku asked, tilting her head to the side.

"Because to the Ieri, their pollen is a strong poison."

"Poison?"

"Yes, poison. Thus, the Ieri cannot approach their habitat. The humans from the town sell them to the Ieri. However, in a twist of irony, humans cannot enter the forest because of the Ieri."

Mimizuku thought over his words, and after a moment of consideration, she stood up and jumped to Kuro.

"Kuro! I'll go! I'll get them!"

It seemed as though Fukurou wanted the purgatory flowers, despite being unable to get them. But Mimizuku wasn't a monster, so she could pick the flowers.

She could do something. Knowing this, her heart leapt.

"I'm going to go pick the Renka!"

Hearing this, Kuro backed away slightly. It was one of those things that humans said that added another wrinkle between his eyebrows.

"But Mimizuku. The habitat of the Renka is a difficult place for humans to reach."

"Yeah, it's all right. Just tell me where they are."

Mimizuku was just about ready to run off. She gave Kuro a few punches with her small fists, as if to coax the information out of him.

She could do something, something for that beautiful King of Night.

She had never wanted to do something for anyone else before. Despite this, she felt ready to do anything for the sake of Fukurou.

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Mimizuku wiped her sweat with the back of her hand.

"Ngh…"

Reaching out with her thin, shaking arms, Mimizuku grabbed a rock above her head. According to Kuro, just past this small cliff was where the Renka grew. Kuro had told her that her flimsy arms would be insufficient to climb the cliffs, but Mimizuku didn't listen. She had already run far from Kuro, and arrived alone at the cave where the Renka were located.

She put all her strength into her fingertips. Her nail came unstuck from her finger, and blood began to ooze out.

Even so, her thin, light body was happy. Seeing plant-like shapes just beyond the cliff, she grabbed the rock and heaved herself into the cave.

Mimizuku took a moment to catch her breath, and then continued onward into the cave.

At the end of the cave was a large, open area in which the purgatory flowers grew.

Light filtered downward from cracks in the cave's ceiling. However, even in complete darkness, their beauty was unmistakable.

Mimizuku face twinkled lightly. She kneeled down to the flowers' roots.

"Is it all right, Mimizuku?" Kuro asked reservedly, as if he were keeping some of his words in his mouth.

"Is it all right, Mimizuku? The purgatory flowers are the flowers of blood. They wither easily, and thus lose color easily. You must grab them by the roots first, or else they will immediately wither and rot…"

Mimizuku grabbed a nearby tree branch and began to dig into the ground.

"Just one stump of it should do," Kuro said. "Just that will make for a strong red color."

Digging into the dry earth, the roots of the Renka began to show. Mimizuku plucked the thin, hard leaf of a Renka that was already nearby.

"This is the most important part."

She grabbed the end of the leaf with one hand, the base of the leaf in the other.

"…Ngh!"

Taking a breath, Mimizuku extracted the leaf from her other hand in one pull.

She heard something slice through the skin of her hand. It was a light chaffing sound, but she was probably just imagining things.

The leaf had sliced straight through Mimizuku's hand. Red blood began to pour out and drip onto the ground. Mimizuku stuck her fingernail inside of it, expanding the wound. She began to sweat, and not out of fatigue. Her temples grew wrinkled.

She then removed the dirt from the Renka and grasped its white roots in her bloodstained hand.

"This is the most important part. In order to prevent the Renka from withering on the way, you need deep, red blood. Mimizuku, you must cut yourself and allow the Renka to absorb your blood. Can you do this?" Kuro asked.

"Of course!" Mimizuku responded.

"Ehehe!"

Sucking the blood from Mimizuku's hand, the flower seemed to grow redder and more full of life. Seeing this, Mimizuku became happy, and held onto the Renka preciously. Kuro had said that just the roots were okay, but the whole flower itself seemed much more beautiful.

"Will you not take a knife?" Kuro asked before Mimizuku departed. That would probably be the best way to go about the task. However, Mimizuku shook her head.

"I hate knives."

Giving a small, short sigh, Mimizuku stood up. She staggered a bit, but she figured that she was all right so long as she had the Renka. Her mind more at ease than it was when she had left.

She carefully scaled the cliff downward. It was a more difficult matter this time around, as only one of her hands was free.

Her attention was completely taken by the Renka, and as she went down, a rock underneath her foot gave way.

"Hyaah!"

She fell to the ground. Or so she thought she would, but instead, she heard a deep, dull thud.

"Gyah!"

Feeling a sharp pain in her shoulders and wrists, she let out a yell. She felt her feet levitating in the air. Rather than falling, she was lowered to a branch and left to dangle from it by the chain around her arms. The pain seemed too far away for her to notice it.

However, Mimizuku gritted her teeth and reaffirmed her grip on her important delivery. The blood from her hands trickled down her arm across her wound-covered skin.

Mimizuku continued to ignore the pain. She waved her legs around looking for a place to plant her feet and regain consciousness of her surroundings.

She found a place to land and loosened her chain from around the branch. When she looked at her wrists, they were completely red from the spreading of the blood.

"…Heheh."

She laughed lightheartedly. *I suppose as long as I managed to get down from the cliff…*

She began to backtrack along the path she had come from, but suddenly she was overcome by a mysterious sensation.

Strange…

She walked over the branches and the grass.

All for the sake of giving the flower to Fukurou.

It feels like… I want to live…

She passed through a thicket that the sun's rays could not penetrate, and came out near a small river. However, she suddenly stopped walking.

Huh…?

Hiding in the shade of the trees over the river, she saw a shadow. It didn't look like a or a monster to Mimizuku.

A human.

There was no mistaking it. Though there shouldn't have been any other humanlike figure in the forest aside from the King of Night, before Mimizuku was the unmistakable shape of a human.

Mimizuku drew closer. It was a short, chubby man with white hair. He had a bow slung around his back, and he was scanning a map with a fearful look on his face.

"Hey, what're you doing?" Mimizuku called out. The man stopped short of springing right up beyond the trees.

"U-Uwaaah! I-I'm lost! I beg you, believe me! Please help me!!" he said, squatting down in terror.

Mimizuku stared at him blankly. She called out to him again.

"Hey! Are you all right?" she said simply. The man timidly raised his head.

"A g-g… a girl…?"

The man blinked several times and looked at Mimizuku. Mimizuku revealed herself.

"You're lost, grandpa? If you go straight down this river, you won't meet up with any monsters at this time of day. But you want to get out, right? Hm… Gimme a second, okay?"

She thought for a moment, and then pulled off the stamen of the Renka. She had to hold onto the flower until she brought it to Fukurou, but even if she brought him the flower, it would still spread its pollen. She didn't want to make Fukurou feel sick.

"All right, take this!"

She grabbed the man's hand. There was a bit of blood on her free hand, but the man took it graciously, despite looking evidently confused at Mimizuku's bloody, disheveled appearance.

"This will keep monsters away, so as long as you're holding onto it, you'll be all right. Just make sure you get out before it dries up and changes color! Well then, do your best!" Mimizuku said.

"What about… you?" the old man asked, dumbfounded.

"Hm? I'm Mimizuku!" she replied, misunderstanding the man's question.

The man shook his head.

"Th-That's not what I meant. Aren't you going to come with me? You can't be staying here by yourself, can you?" The man looked up and down Mimizuku, seeming to pity her. Mimizuku didn't understand what his gaze meant.

"Me?" she replied. She blinked a few times, and then laughed. "I can't go! I have to deliver this flower to Fukurou. Well then, see you later!"

Saying the words caused her to remember her aim. Mimizuku turned her body around, paying the old man not the slightest bit of attention.

Full of energy, Mimizuku returned to the forest.

She eventually shrank to a tiny dot in the distance. The old man looked down at the blood-drenched flower in his hand. He had the urge to fol-

low Mimizuku, but he gave up and went along the path that Mimizuku had explained to him.

"I have to tell him… I have to tell the Holy Knight," he muttered.

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As she was running toward the mansion, Mimizuku suddenly came to a halt. A shadowy figure with pitch-black wings was standing tall, facing the lake. Mimizuku shook her head several times, making sure she wasn't simply seeing things.

"Fukurou!" she called out loudly. The black-winged shadow slowly turned around.

She ran up to him. However, she couldn't come close enough to extend her hand out to touch him. The air around Fukurou prevented her from doing so.

"Fukurou! I'm giving you this!"

Mimizuku held out her bloody hands. She held the Renka out to Fukurou.

Fukurou looked down at he crimson flower with his moon eyes.

In Mimizuku's muddy, bloodstained hands was an unmistakable deep crimson.

He finally opened his mouth to speak.

"What do you want as collateral?" he asked in a low, yet deep whispering tone.

Mimizuku's sanpaku eyes became large and round, like dishes. She was surprised. She hadn't thought of what to ask for.

Collateral… something that I want…

What should I do?

She could ask to be eaten again. She had been told by Kuro that it was hopeless, but maybe she could try again.

What did I bring him the flower for? Mimizuku thought.

She was fine with spilling her own blood and enduring the pain. And she had thought that she didn't want to die, too. If she was to deliver the flower safely, she couldn't die.

She had never once thought to do anything for anyone but herself.

Oh!

Finally thinking of something that she could ask for, she smiled.

"Praise me."

Anything would be fine.

Well then, praise me, King of Night!

She had never thought to do something for anyone before. But she had thought to bring the flower to Fukurou on her own. In her whole life, she had never been praised for doing anything. Usually when she finished a job, she was hit or scolded.

She had never done the work for the sake of being praised, but she thought that it would have been wonderful if she were. No one in the "village" ever gave her any praise. She never considered wanting praise while in the "village," but now, Mimizuku wanted to be praised by Fukurou.

Fukurou didn't respond. He narrowed his eyes and took the Renka from her.

Without looking her in the eyes, he moved his lips.

As he did, a shaking could be felt in the air. In between Mimizuku and Fukurou, a small figure appeared. It was Kuro.

"My Lord."

Kuro fluttered on top of Mimizuku's head, and kneeled before Fukurou. Even atop Mimizuku's head, Kuro's and Fukurou's eyes did not meet.

"It's Kuro!" Mimizuku said, shattering the atmosphere.

Mimizuku felt Kuro stepping around on her head.

"It is good that you are back. Mimizuku," he said in a low voice that only Mimizuku could hear. At these words, Mimizuku became incredibly happy, and she began to laugh carelessly.

Fukurou turned to Kuro.

"Make the paint. Prepare the fire," he ordered.

Kuro was about to say something when Mimizuku puffed out her chest.

"Yes sir! I'll do it! I can prepare fires!" she said loudly, her eyes sparkling. She moved to take a step toward Fukurou, however she suddenly lost her strength and fell on her knees.

"Ah!"

Without a chance to take a breath, she fell onto the ground. She was unable to extend her arms in time, and fell backward on her shoulders, ending up flat on her back and facing upwards.

"Uuugh…"

Her head began to feel fuzzy, and her vision began to sway. Mimizuku's consciousness slipped away into darkness.

Kuro, who had been on Mimizku's head the whole time, flapped his wings and landed beside Mimizuku.

"The fool. It is only natural that she is suffering from the blood loss."

Kuro began to pull out Mimizuku's left hand from underneath her, but suddenly stopped and leered at his king.

"How would you like the fire, Your Highness?"

Fukurou glared at his subordinate and exhaled heavily.

"Forget about it," he spat. He began to walk off by himself. Kuro continued to argue.

"King! I plan on taking this child back to you once she wakes up. Or if you wish, I can cut off her breath and kill her immediately!" Kuro shouted in his broken voice. Fukurou threw him a glance.

"Do as you like." With one flap of his wings, he disappeared into the darkness.

Kuro turned back to Mimizuku, and ran his hand over her bloody left hand.

He conjured a bluish white flame.

"You should be more careful. Mimizuku," he sighed in his broken voice to Mimizuku, who did not hear him. "You have been let off once again."

The last few stripes of sunlight were finally wiped away, and night began to enshroud the forest again.

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A large oak door that gave a feeling of agedness opened, the bell attached to the knob ringing as it did.

"Welcome!" the barista shouted, more in response to the sound of the bell than to the customer. However, when she saw whom it was that entered, she raised an eyebrow.

"Oh my, you've come again today Sir Knight!" the portly barista called out, causing everyone in the bar to turn toward the door.

"Yo." The young man in the doorway held out his left index finger and smiled, causing the bar to suddenly explode with excitement.

The sound of banter from the men hopped around the bar.

"It's been a while since you've visited, Sir Knight!"

"Hey Andy! How about that game of poker you promised me the other day?!"

"Leaving your wife again to play around at night, eh!"

"I'm burned out by civil life, you know."

"Hey, hey! Leave that kind of talk at home!"

In the blink of an eye, the bar was filled with the sound of laughter. The atmosphere had made a heel-face turn just with the entrance of the young man. He received earnest greetings one by one, and made his way to the counter as per usual and took a seat.

Spinning her rotund body around, the barista pulled out a jockey.

"The usual?"

The young man smiled.

"Yes please," he affirmed. A regular sat down beside him and started to talk.

"What's with you Sir Holy Knight? Herbal Tea again? This isn't a place where kids and young ladies come to play, you know!"

"Yeah, yeah, I know that."

The Holy Knight gave a troubled laugh as he engaged with the regular.

"The wife says I'm a bother while she's preparing food, so she lets me spend the money here!"

"Hahahaha! That sounds like that noisy wife of yours all right!"

The drunken man suddenly burst into a flurry of laughter.

"And by the way, it's not that I hate alcohol. It's just that things are more interesting when you're not drunk. That's why I prefer to go for the more moderate and cheap herbal tea."

"Oh, you know I'm fine with it," the barista slammed the jockey filled with herbal tea onto the counter in front of Ann Duke.

"We just have to call on the Holy Knight, and we'll always flourish! Here, these tea leaves are a special order that just arrived from Gardalsia."

This bar was a commoner's place, run by people of poor parentage. While Ann Duke was the only one in the country who had achieved the distinction of "Holy Knight," rather than visiting places more befitting of his lineage, he came to places where the people would call him "Sir Knight," which he much preferred over his official title of "Holy Knight." Back several years when he was simply "the youngest child of the MacValen family," he pulled the holy sword from its

scabbard, and though he was chosen by the sword to be the Holy Knight, he hung around his old friends who called him “Andy.”

Ann Duke would always come to this bar, order two herbal teas, and partake in conversation.

Here, he could listen to unadulterated dissatisfaction with the king, or yell out a eulogy. Or, he could hear about unrest and issues occurring outside of the castle. Since the bar doubled as an inn, many travelers passed through, and it served as a window to the outside world.

In a place like this, Ann Duke could engage in general conversation and get in touch with peoples’ true feelings. He never judged anyone who was upset with the king. The words of the people outside of the castle were important. After all, a country is its people.

“By the way, have you heard the story, Sir Knight?”

For example, the barista would bring him stories and information like this.

"What story?"

"About the happenings in that dark Forest of Night to the south of here! It's about that single demon king who lives there."

Ann Duke raised an eyebrow, bidding the barista to continue.

"From what I've heard, it seems like an idiot hunter got lost in the Forest of Night from wandering too far from a nearby forest."

"You said he got lost? And he came back alive?" Ann Duke asked. There were countless monsters prowling the forest, and there was no way any single hunter could have come out alive.

"That's right! He was able to come back and all, but that hunter, they say he was helped by a little girl in the forest!"

"A girl?"

"Yeah! As it goes, she was practically skin and bones. She's probably been captured by the demon king too, 'cause it seems like she had chains around

her wrists and ankles, and she was in disastrous condition."

Ann Duke's interest in the story was scrawled all over his face.

"So what happened to her?"

"She just helped the hunter, and then disappeared back into the forest! That's how the story goes!"

"And how trustworthy is this tale?" Ann Duke asked.

"Well," the man beside him interrupted, "that hunter, they say that the moment he got home, he ran straight to the temple to tell everyone."

Ann Duke frowned. He held his fingertip to his lips, indicating that he was deep in thought.

"It's a dangerous world, isn't it? That poor child must be so lonely. And to put shackles on her like that, they would tell children long ago that the demon king would eat them if they misbehaved, but that kind of thing is in a way even worse than being eaten. This kind of thing is just so wrong, right?"

He was easy to sympathize with, and the barista already had tears in her eyes.

"How strange…" Ann Duke muttered, looking at the barista.

If he really ran to the temple like they say he did, then the likelihood of this story being true is quite high. However, the man next to him had no relation to the temple. Amongst people like that, rumors spread easily.

He had a feeling there might just be people blowing the story out of proportion.

"…It can't be, that white tanuki…"

"Hm? What about a tanuki, Sir Knight?" the barista asked.

Ann Duke smiled.

"Don't worry about it. I was just thinking out loud to myself."

He then placed a clean, shiny coin on the counter and stood up.

"What's wrong? You haven't had your second cup yet."

"Yeah, I just remembered something urgent I need to do."

He turned around and faced the men in the bar.

"Any of you in here know the name of that hunter that got lost in the forest?"

The men all settled down for a moment and looked up at him. After a moment, a voice from a table near the entrance rose.

"He that old man Shiira who lives on the edge of town, right?"

Ann Duke gave a reactionary "thank you" to the man and sped toward the entrance.

"Thanks for the drink!" he called to the barista.

The barista had a look of discomfort on her face.

"Holy Knight, you're going to do whatever you can to save that kid, eh?"

Ann Duke didn't say anything; he simply smiled and nodded.

Then, he left the bar, rattling the door with the same sound it had made when he entered.

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The moon was beautiful. Mimizuku sighed as she went to the lake. Fukurou's location was indistinct, but Mimizuku knew where he was.

Fukurou had been watching the lake from the same treetop he had been the previous night. *He's probably looking at the moon's reflection again,* Mimizuku thought.

Mimizuku at first casually watched Fukurou for a while, but then her eyes sparkled as if she had remembered something, and she began to climb the tree next to Fukurou's. The stump was thick and uneven, but the tree's shape was good, so Mimizuku climbed it without any issue.

Thanks to Kuro, she had lost almost all feeling in the palm of her left hand. The skin felt stiff, but it wasn't any serious handicap. Mimizuku felt proud of the scar on her hand.

She made her way to the top of a tree and climbed onto a branch next to Fukurou.

Her shackles jangled the whole way up, their sharp sound piercing the quiet stillness of the night.

"Are you not bothered by those?"

The sudden voice caught Mimizuku off guard, causing her foot to slip. She let out a yelp.

Regaining her posture after a moment, she sat down on the branch. She wished she could be closer to Fukurou. Fukurou didn't make the slightest movement towards Mimizuku. He sat gazing at the water's surface the whole time.

However, now she had heard Fukurou's voice. There was no mistaking it. He had initiated conversation with her.

"Eh, I, uh…"

Mimizuku was flustered as she searched for the right words.

He was probably talking about her shackles. They were so noisy, after all.

"Well, I don't hate them, I guess."

Mimizuku held her chains up. They rang as usual.

"I think the jingly-jangly sound they make is pretty. I guess I deal with it, so I don't hate it."

Mimizuku had had her shackles for a very long time. They had been welded onto her when she was young, and they didn't have a keyhole. Ever since then, the bone around the areas locked with chains had grown thick, and she was lucky that her wrists and ankles never grew any larger. If they had, her hands and feet would have probably fallen off.

Fukurou didn't even give Mimizuku a glance.

"Eheheh…"

Even so, Mimizuku was happy, so she laughed. If she looked at his face from the side, she thought it quite resembled a human's. She had figured that all monsters looked similar to Kuro.

"Fukurou—" she said, her voice so low that it seemed to blend in with the silence of the night itself. "Why do you hate humans?"

A long silence followed. While running her hands along her chains, she waited for Fukurou's response.

"Because they're ugly."

His response was sudden, and laced with his usual vitriol. His deep voice shook Mimizuku's eardrums.

Mimizuku looked up. She opened her mouth halfway without saying anything, then began to speak.

"Ugly? If you go to a big town, surely you'll find some beautiful people."

She hadn't seen any herself though. She hadn't spoken like this about humans before either. She wondered if there really were any. *It would be nice if there were, I guess. Beautiful people. Kind people.* Somewhere in this wonderful world.

"I'm not talking about their appearance. Their souls are ugly."

"Souls? What's that?"

"It's something inside one's body."

"But isn't all that's in there just blood, your chewed up food, and a bunch of other squishy stuff?" Her comment earned her a look of disdain from Fukurou.

There was nothing she could do about it, so she thought for a while. Since it was rare for Fukurou to

talk to her, she wanted to drag it out for as long as possible, as talking to him made her happy.

"Is it like your heart? Something like that?"

"Something like that."

"Oooh! You're saying their hearts are ugly? There's lots of stuff I hate too, you know. Eheheh. Like those people who would tell me they felt dirtier just from looking at me. They hit me lots of times! They said that the livestock weren't allowed to use human words. It was so strange! Even though I was livestock, I could speak like all the other humans."

Mimizuku laughed. Fukurou looked at her as if she were truly something dirty. However, Mimizuku didn't think that his gaze was hatred. Even though the people in the "village" were dirty themselves, they looked at her with eyes that said that she was even filthier. But Fukurou was much more beautiful than the humans, so Mimizuku thought it was natural that Fukurou look at her and find her dirty.

I'm dirty, but here I am sitting next to the gorgeous Fukurou.

"Eheheh. Hey, Fukurou."

She giggled.

"I'm really, really happy right now!"

Fukurou narrowed his eyes as though he couldn't understand what she meant.

"You, girl who names beasts," he spoke.

"Yes?!" Mimizuku responded, puffing out her chest.

Fukurou ignored her response.

"What are those numbers on your forehead?"

That was something that Kuro had asked her before. She smiled and answered him.

"These were done by an iron!"

She couldn't remember what she had told Kuro about them, so her explanation this time was somewhat different.

"You know, like what they put on cows and sheep. I was together with them. It burned and made me confused. The iron was red hot. I don't remember anything after that, 'cause I fell over…" she recounted, laughing.

Fukurou didn't speak, but reached out for Mimizuku. His claws were a deep, dark blue that could have been mistaken for black.

Mimizuku's heart began to beat faster. He had held out his hand to her before, but this time felt different.

His finger touched her forehead.

Is Fukurou going to eat me?

Mimizuku closed her eyes.

If she was eaten, she hoped it wouldn't be painful. Not like the iron, that was unpleasantly hot.

Fukurou's finger was cold. However, she could feel remaining warmth after he removed his finger.

Before long, Fukurou pulled back his long claw.

He didn't eat Mimizuku.

Mimizuku opened her eyes. The moon sparkled, and Mimizuku began to feel strange, as if there was a bell ringing in her head. She began to feel thirsty. She felt a burning, prickling pain somewhere.

"Eheheh," she laughed. She wished that anything could be made better by laughing.

"Rather than those unsightly numbers, less might be better," Fukurou said, narrowing his eyes.

"Huh?"

His words gave Mimizuku an idea, and she started to slowly make her way down from the tree. She ran toward the lake. Her feet got tangled as she went, but she looked ahead at the lake so as not to lose her balance.

"Uwah!"

She fell into the lake. With a large splash, ripples began to radiate through the lake. The shallow lake only reached up to her back. She looked at her reflection in the rippling surface of the water.

"Nyeheheh."

The numbers on her forehead had turned into a mysterious pattern.

It's beautiful.

It looked similar to the tattoos on Fukurou's body, and it shone under the moonlight. For the first time since she was born, Mimizuku had thought herself to be beautiful.

Chapter 4

Deliverance

I'LL GATHER BEAUTIFUL THINGS, Mimizuku thought.

Beautiful flowers, leaves, and smooth, glassy stones. Elegantly twisting branches and balls of sap like precious stones.

While it was bright out, Mimizuku went into the forest to gather those kinds of things, and when the sun lowered, she returned to Fukurou's mansion.

She slowly opened the door of the mansion. The second time she had opened the door, she was holding a beautiful yellow flower in her hand. Fukurou made no effort to drive Mimizuku out, so as a sort of toll for entry, Mimizuku always brought something beautiful for Fukurou.

The forest was overflowing with beautiful things.

Light soaked out from behind the door to Fukurou's room. When Mimizuku opened it, she was met by Fukurou's back. She walked so as not to make too much noise, but her shackles still clanged loudly. She sat down next to Fukurou.

Holding a small, purple flower in her hand, Mimizuku gazed up at Fukurou.

Fukurou stood before a massive canvas. He painted with blues, greens, and the deep red of the Renka. Fukurou ladled out colors onto the canvas with his shining claws. It seemed as though he was layering on light membranes of color onto the canvas, but they eventually converged into a picture.

Mimizuku sighed at the fantastical scene.

She then suddenly realized that she did not fit in this place.

Fukurou is beautiful. His drawing is beautiful. The room is beautiful.

The room was decorated with the beautiful things that Mimizuku had gathered, and they had a certain

liberated feeling to them, as they seemed to dance around the room.

But…

Why am I here? Mimizuku lowered her head.

"Why won't you eat me?"

The words came out with no disconnect from her thoughts. Fukurou didn't look at her, however after a long silence, when Mimizuku had already forgotten what she said, he suddenly opened his mouth.

"Girl who names beasts."

"Yeah?" Mimizuku replied meekly.

Fukurou looked up, but not at Mimizuku.

He simply asked, "Why do you want to be eaten by me? Why do you wish to be eaten by a monster?"

Mimizuku blinked, puzzled.

She hadn't thought of the exact reason why. However, Mimizuku was able to answer. She had always known the answer deep within her subconscious.

"Because I don't want to die."

Fukurou didn't say anything. It was as if a hole had been stabbed into him. Since Fukurou wouldn't

talk, Mimizuku, risking her life, began to connect her words together.

"You know. I hate using knives…"

"…Speak in a way that I can understand," Fukurou grumbled sullenly.

Mimizuku smiled.

"Ok, so I'll tell you why. I used to do lots of different kinds of work, but the worst, dirtiest, most painful job, oh even now I don't like to think of it, what I hated most was judging people."

"Judging?"

"Yeah." Mimizuku gave a curt laugh and nodded. Fukurou's beautiful eyes were turned in her direction, so it was natural that she smiled. She continued to laugh.

"The dead people, even though they were killed by the villagers, I had to cut up their stomach little by little, then put my hand in all their squishy insides and pull out their hearts. They said they sold for high prices. That was a job that only I did. I was told I'd be good for it by a woman in the "village," but I

didn't think so at all. Still, I'd get hit if I said anything. When I hold a knife, I remember that work, so that's why I don't hold knives. Even if you wash them in a river, the smell of the blood and insides doesn't ever go away. The worst part was showing it to a live person, 'cause they knew they were gonna get stabbed. I'd always imagine how they felt. I'd remember whenever I got hit. I didn't want to die. I had to bury the dead people too, but since digging holes took a long time, the body would rot and get covered with bugs, and it made a horrible smell. I got used to that, though, but I never wanted to become like those people. If you get eaten, you'll always be beautiful, right?

"And then," Mimizuku continued, but Fukurou suddenly covered her mouth.

"Fgyah…" She made a strange yelp of surprise.

Fukurou violently held Mimizuku's mouth shut, and his face had an indescribable expression close to disgusted hatred.

"That's enough. Don't speak."

Mimizuku laughed.

She laughed spasmodically, and then eventually fell into a fit of laughter. Fukurou let go of her, and turned back toward his canvas.

A long silence followed.

"Why?" Fukurou's question was sudden.

Mimizuku tilted her neck and looked at Fukurou from below.

Fukurou's eyes stared straight at Mimizuku.

"Why? Why didn't you run away from such treatment?"

Mimizuku blinked several times. Her eyelashes quivered dryly.

"Um…"

She opened her mouth to speak, but she remained still as if she had forgotten what she was supposed to say. What should she say? That she was hit, and smacked, and oppressed. Those were the reasons she could never leave the "village."

"I don't know. I don't know why. I hated all of it, and it was painful and difficult. Someone people of-

fered to help me get out, even. Even so, I don't know."

If she thought about it, it was a truly strange thing. She tilted her neck.

"Why? There wasn't one time when I tried to escape…"

It was because that was life. That kind of everyday life was normal to her. If that was what was normal, she felt that there was no other way out of it.

Even though she accepted that kind of treatment, she never truly believed that those days would end.

"Then why are you here now?" Fukurou asked. He had already returned his attention to his painting, and was running his claw across it.

"Um, well, I guess…"

Mimizuku knew she could answer this one. She knew the reason why she had left the "village" behind.

"I figured I'd had enough," Mimizuku said, grinning widely.

She plopped down onto the cold floor, and lowered her eyelids as if to sleep, however, she began to speak as if singing.

"Mimizuku slept in the horse's stable. She was tucked away in the hay. And Mr. Horse was always busy, always making loud noises, because the people made him upset. All those people completely changed, I heard!"

The petty fights among the thieves were always territorial disputes.

The ditches grew deeper and deeper, until they were comparable to seas, and eventually the thieves assailed their own village.

Mimizuku didn't understand what had happened.

Screams and shouts stabbed at her ears, and the sound of flames crackling here and there could be heard.

And then came the deep scent of blood.

Before long, katana-wielding men barged into the stable. With a large hand, one of the men dragged

Mimizuku, who had been curled up in the hay and covering her ears, outside.

"I got Mimizu. 'Ey you, with the red hair, there're no wounds on 'er cheek, take 'er."

For some reason, those were the only words she could remember.

In that moment, her thoughts had stopped, and she didn't feel any pain or distress.

The scenery seemed far off, as if it had been burned away.

"'Slave girl,' eh? That's what he said."

Then, the man smiled. His body hairs stood on end.

He displayed a kind of disgusted revulsion.

"'Interesting,' he said. I don't get what he means by that, but that's what he means by that, so whatever, he said it."

Mimizuku's head swayed downward.

"'Interesting.'"

The red-haired man smiled, and took Mimizuku with him.

Mimizuku's mind was perfectly still. It had really stopped, she hadn't thought of anything at all.

However, Mimizuku had brought a knife with her from the haystack.

It was the knife she always used to cut up the corpses.

She felt like she had screamed, like something had shaken in her throat. However, she couldn't remember anything. She couldn't remember her voice, or even if the things she yelled were actual words.

"I stabbed him. Yeah."

Just as she did with the corpses, she dug into the man's abdomen with all her might. Using the center as leverage, she cut across the entire body. A scream like cloth being ripped arose. It was the man's voice. The blood from his body was much more alive and fresh than the blood from the moldy old corpses. It splattered across her face, and entered her eyes.

Her vision became blurred.

"It was the first time I stabbed a living person. The man fell down after that. He definitely died, yep."

Mimizuku snickered.

"He definitely died, Mimizuku killed him."

As she recounted the story, sweat began to drip down her forehead. It wasn't warm, but strange instead. She felt cold all over, and her fingers began to shiver.

She had always been ordered to do a similar thing. She had cut up corpses several times.

However, what she had done then was fundamentally different, and Mimizuku couldn't comprehend the meaning of her own actions.

"So that's when I thought, 'I've had enough.' I had really had enough, I was really tired…" she recalled casually. She was tired. She had never been tired before that.

She gave up on everything.

And then, she remembered a story she heard long ago. Far in the east, there was a place called the Forest of Night, where lots of monsters lived.

It was said that not a trace was left of anyone eaten by the monsters.

"So I walked all the way here."

She felt as though she had received a shock to the head. She began to get dizzy.

Mimizuku slowly stood up, and moved closer to Fukurou, looking at his face.

When she looked at his moon eyes, she felt rested.

Fukurou didn't push her away, but simply scowled at her unpleasantly. He then opened his mouth slightly.

"Do you still want to be eaten by me? Girl who names beasts."

Mimizuku wondered why he was asking her something so obvious. She had said it several times, that she wanted to be eaten by Fukurou, and disappear without a trace. That's what she had always wished for.

Of course I do!

She opened her mouth to say it.

She didn't hesitate, and the words were ready to come out.

However, her thin, dry lips couldn't muster any more speech.

She flapped her mouth open and closed like one of the fish in the lake. Mimizuku didn't understand why she couldn't say it.

"Uh, uh."

Mimizuku ran her finger across her lips in a strange way. She wanted to say, "Eat me." It seemed like Fukurou really would eat her right now if she asked.

If she truly wished for it, now was her opportunity.

My wish?

Her wish. Her hope. That is to say, what she wanted.

"I, uh, Fukurou…"

She became lost in thought. If she couldn't say what she wanted to say, then it couldn't be helped.

Mimizuku continued to speak.

"Hey… is it all right for me to sleep here today?"

In this beautiful room. Surrounded by Fukurou's painting, Mimizuku thought that it would be wonderful if she could sleep there.

Fukurou seemed not to pay any attention to her request, and he simply turned back to his painting.

However, he didn't refuse, and Mimizuku became incredibly happy. It was as if he had told her to do as she liked.

Mimizuku curled up at Fukurou's feet, and she quietly fell asleep.

Fukurou glanced down at her for an infinitesimal moment, and then returned to running his claws along his canvas, painting.

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The door to the king's office burst open, and a human shape walked in and sank into the sofa. The king looked up from his documents and raised an eyebrow.

"Where did the chivalry of the old knights go?"

"To the other side of that star, maybe," Ann Duke said indifferently, as if calling out from inside of the sofa.

"My goodness. That's a makeshift way of doing things."

"What do you mean?"

Not stirred in the slightest by the king's question, Ann Duke sprang up from the sofa and turned to face the king.

"So, are the preparations for the subjugation of the demon king going smoothly?"

"…"

The king responded with silence. Ann Duke began to speak with a fully serious expression.

"The populace is inclined towards annihilating the demon king. He hasn't done any real harm until now, and he's just used to scare misbehaving children. They're just sympathizing with that girl that he's locked up. And now they're saying that the kingdom's Magician Brigade has already set up its preparations as well?"

The Holy Knight hadn't known about any of it. He was in the Knight troupe, but he wasn't at the top of the group. He had no political authority, and his abilities were used only for the purpose of fighting. He was the one who had chosen this lifestyle, working slow to start and staying at home.

"That's right. You, the Holy Knight, are in charge of breaking through the advance guard," the king said to Ann Duke in a relaxed tone.

The king then raised his face.

"What will you do?"

Looking at his eyes straight on, Ann Duke remained silent for a period of time.

"…To the public, it seems as though we're going in to save the girl, but what's the real reason we're subjugating the demon king?" Ann Duke asked in a low voice.

"For the sake of the people of this country," the king answered, his gaze shifting slightly to the side.

Ann Duke knew what he really meant. The current king was an excellent king. His country had been

invaded many times, and he had rebuilt it in one generation. Using the region's strong magical traditions, he formed the Magician Brigade, and they became his military. He made farming and trade prosperous, and gave the country power.

After a hundred years, the legendary Holy Sword passed down from long ago chose a master, and this "Holy Knight" became a symbol of the Red Ark Kingdom's independence.

However there was something missing. By making the demon king surrender, they gained several things.

Ann Duke had understood the king's prediction. It had been ten years since he was chosen to be Holy Knight. To Ann Duke, who had lost his father at an early age, the kingdom was like a father, a partner, and a friend to him. He had never drawn his sword for his own sake. Whether his enemies were humans or not, Ann Duke did not like unnecessary killing. He did not treat his sword as a decoration, as he under-

stood that when he brought it out, a life would disappear.

"So it's come to this… I'll go."

Despite all of that, he lightly shrugged his shoulders and, with a troubled look on his face, gave a smile.

"My wife's not gonna be happy. She'll say something like, 'If you can't save one little girl, then shouldn't you quit being a Holy Knight?'"

He had understood that this was also a victory for the king, in a way. Even the domestic protector Holy Knight couldn't raise a finger against his wife. The king knew that very well.

"Perhaps Orietta should join the ranks as well."

The king's face shined at his idea.

"The Maiden of the Holy Sword would raise the morale of the Magician Brigade more than anything! With the magic reared in the temple…"

"Hey, Your Majesty." Ann Duke interrupted the king, smiling.

"I'm going to tell you something beforehand," he said as if it were no big deal.

Though he spoke as if it were no big deal, his voice was lower than usual.

The king took a deep breath for no reason in particular.

"However you use the Holy Knight is up to you. You can show me off like some charm, or you can send me to the battlefield, so long as the fighting is for a good reason."

From there, the smile in Ann Duke's blue eyes disappeared.

"However, if you do anything like sending Orietta onto a battlefield, I'll throw away the Holy Sword, take her with me, and leave this country."

He spoke clearly and had a grim look on his face.

The king was not unprepared to slash through obstacles to his country. He was able to keep a cool appearance, however he could not take rebellion from Ann Duke. He was a "symbol" of the country, after all.

"Are you threatening your king?"

To those words, Ann Duke smiled brightly.

"I'm just being honest."

» » » » » » »

Mimizuku awoke at dawn to the sound of small birds flapping their wings. Light entered through the giant window. The strength of the light forecasted sunny skies. Mimizuku gently closed her eyes again, and went back to sleep. The cold floor was comfortable, and she already seemed to be drifting back to sleep.

"Mimizuku."

Hearing her name called, Mimizuku jolted awake.

As she raised her upper body, she looked around to see that the master of the room was missing, but then saw Kuro stopped on the lattice of the window.

"Kuro!"

Mimizuku's eyes sparkled upon seeing Kuro. Kuro entered the room quietly.

The morning sunlight sure is pretty, Mimizuku thought.

"What a condition. Mimizuku, there are wood-grains from the floor stuck in your cheek."

Kuro's words felt kind, so Mimizuku laughed as she scraped her hand across her cheek.

"How are you, Kuro? Isn't it rare for you to come to the mansion?"

"Indeed." Kuro gave a small nod.

"Mimizuku. I have come to tell you something."

"To tell me something? What is it?"

Mimizuku dragged herself to the windowsill. When she looked up, Kuro was looking right back at her, and after a short moment of hesitation, Kuro spoke.

"For several days, perhaps as long as a month, I will be absent from the forest."

"Absent?"

Mimizuku tilted her head. Kuro nodded.

"By the orders of the King of Night, I am to leave the forest for a while, and take care of a few duties in

the human world. For that time, even if you call my name, it will not reach my ears. That is why you must take care of yourself. Can you do that?"

"Yes sir!"

Mimizuku raised her hand high and gave an energetic reply. However she immediately looked downward.

"What do you mean 'orders of the King of Night?'"

"That is…" Kuro began to speak, but then closed his mouth. "I cannot say."

"All right then." Mimizuku smiled. She wasn't unhappy about it. In fact, she was happy that Kuro had come to tell her that he was leaving the forest.

Kuro watched Mimizuku laugh, and eventually opened his mouth to speak.

"At times, Mimizuku. Before I go from the forest, I will tell you one legend."

"Legend?"

"That is correct. A story from long, long ago."

Mimizuku couldn't understand the intention of Kuro's sudden words, but she didn't have any reason not to listen to him.

"All right then…"

Sitting back down on the wood grains, Mimizuku waited for Kuro to speak.

After a bit of hesitation, Kuro made a motion like scratching his cheek, and then began to speak.

"This is a story which has long since occurred. It is a story which lies quite a ways away from the heartlessness of the flow of time."

He spoke loudly and with haste in his broken voice. He could be likened to a troubadour recounting the epic of a hero.

"This is the story of a prince who lived in a kingdom that was destroyed ages ago."

Mimizuku tilted her head. It was like a story from another world.

Kuro did not halt his speech.

"It was far, very far away. If you crossed several mountains and went so far north that human skin

would change color, you would find this tiny kingdom. They did not write, and they could not hunt. However, this country was never poor, because in a certain mountain in that country laid a dazzling mineral. The people mined that mineral, manufactured with it, and sold it, gaining much wealth in the process. The lifestyle of the king was as well marked by abundance. He was able to hire mercenaries, and thus increased his military power. Though the land was covered in deep snow during the winter, this only made the fleeting spring more beautiful."

"Snow…"

Mimizuku couldn't imagine such a thing. She searched her thoughts and memories, and she thought of a pretty white powder.

"The people were wealthy. The royal family was wealthy. The foolish people mined every last bit of the mineral in the mountain…"

At that point, the tone of Kuro's voice fell.

"All things with shape at one point disappear. That is one of the logical truths of the world. However,

with time, people forget this. The mineral ran out. The people began to fight amongst themselves, trying to amass as much of what little of the mineral was left. When the king thought of what he should do, he decided that the remaining amount of the mineral would be confiscated by force. With their industry potential dispersed, the king could do nothing to help the people overcome their reliance on the mineral."

The story was hard for Mimizuku to understand, and Mimizuku troubled herself thinking about it. However, she decided to go along with it anyway, and, remaining silent, she listened to Kuro's story.

"Now, the royal family had one prince. He was born when the last of the mineral was starting to disappear. Thus, he was swarmed by cold stares from the people. Though the disappearance of the mineral was natural, however, as is natural to human nature, they needed to blame someone else for their hardship. The prince was born with the hardship of persecution. He was treated as a prince. He was given things to wear

and food to eat. However, the king and queen he was born to did not love him."

Mimizuku thought quietly.

What does it mean, to be loved?

"The birthright of the prince was solitude. However, he never thought to end his life. No one was kind to him, but he thought that the scenery of his country was too beautiful for words. He thought to give form to that beautiful scenery reflected in his eyes. In order to do that, the prince took a brush, and—he began to paint a picture."

"Ah…"

Here, Mimizuku realized what, or rather who, Kuro's story was about.

Kuro didn't respond to her, and continued to recount the tale.

"Before long, a revolution occurred in the country. People at their limit from starvation due to the misgovernment of the king set the castle alight. The prince, who lived in a separate building, was also pulled out before the public. As an incarnation of

their pastime, they set the painting that the prince had made on fire in the town square. It was crushing to the prince, who had nothing but painting left in his life."

Mimizuku looked at Kuro in blank amazement, as if she had seen the whole scene play out before her.

"The prince was sealed away in a tall tower until the day of his execution. In the room, with nothing but a window blocked by iron bars, the prince, bound in chains, little by little, continued to paint even until the day he was to be beheaded."

"What did he use to paint with?" she asked, thinking the situation strange.

"He used nothing. He had no brush. The prince bit his own finger and drew upon the wall with his own blood, as if possessed. He might have already gone insane before, that prince who only saw the ugly side of people."

Mimizuku gasped, as if out of breath or taken in by admiration for the prince. It was a sort of deep understanding.

"The painting was the reddest of red. Its beauty was sublime. The picture was made by shaving off his existence."

Before, Kuro had said, "Paintings which use red are the most beautiful." Mimizuku could see no inconsistency in his words. She had come to understand everything that had led up to this point.

"That picture could even summon monsters. I have visited it myself. And I have also seen the battered, injured prince. He was a human, yet that spirit, that magic power. I asked him if he still wanted to live. I asked him if he would not dislike stopping being a human. He answered righteously."

Is that right, Mimizuku thought. That was how it went.

"That is right when he came to this forest and took the position of King of Night. He is still alive today. When he disappears, all of his magic power will return to the earth, and create a new king. However, there is another way to replace him. If the current king chooses a successor, then through this way, any-

one could become the king. They would receive the moon eyes. I am the one who told the prince to go to the forest. He went and met the king. He was not a human, but a king, and in this way, king met king, it is said. And thus it came to pass that the king was chosen."

After that, Kuro spoke once more.

"The king was chosen by the world."

Kuro often referred to the world. The selection of the king, allowances. Those were all choices of the world. This was how the world of the monsters revolved.

"My tale ends here."

Kuro brought the story gently to a close. *Why?* Mimizuku thought. *Why would Kuro tell me a story like this…?*

"Well, it is now time for me to leave the forest behind."

Kuro abruptly flew up.

"I hope we may meet again. Mimizuku."

"If fate allows it?" Mimizuku asked.

"Gyagyagyagya!" Kuro laughed. "Yes, if fate allows it. Let us meet again. Mimizuku!"

Kuro then disappeared like a puff of smoke. Mimizuku stood up and leaned out of the window. She followed Kuro with just her mind's eye.

Then suddenly, Mimizuku realized that her cheeks were wet.

"…Huh?"

As Mimizuku blinked, she saw transparent droplets of water fall.

"What's this? Does this mean I'm sick?"

Panicking, Mimizuku wiped the droplets away. It wasn't the first time it had happened, but she had no memory of any other times. Mimizuku thought that the droplets were a bit like sweat. Then, wiping the falling droplets from her eyes, she turned toward the forest over which the sun was rising and rushed out of the mansion to find more beautiful things so she could see Fukurou again.

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The lamp made with magical power gave off an unnaturally red glow, like a ripe bitter orange. The magicians, suppressing the sound of their breath, were gathering at the entrance to the Forest of Night. They each wore a hood over their eyes and held an old oak cane.

"There's no moon out tonight," said Ann Duke as if the words leaked out of his lips. He was encased in armor. "That's a shame. It's said that the moon that rises over the Forest of Night is incredibly beautiful."

A voice sprang up from directly behind him.

"It cannot be helped, Sir Holy Knight."

The voice's owner had a hood on like the rest of the magicians, and also held an oak cane in his wrinkly hand. There were several rings on his fingers to aid with sorcery.

"We waited for the new moon. The King of Night's magical power drops quite a bit during the night of the new moon. If we intend to make him surrender, we cannot let him escape."

"Will you fasten together the joint effort of our country's pride, the Magician Brigade? Can you do it, Sir Riveil?" Ann Duke asked, smiling casually as usual.

"Most likely."

There was a pause between Ann Duke's question and Riveil's answer, but it wasn't because he was troubled by it. What got in the way of his words was his petty pride and conceit.

"Most likely. So long as you, Sir Holy Knight, hold the Holy Sword, we cannot be matched, I think."

Ann Duke groaned emotionlessly at Riveil's words. He looked around at the Forest of Night that perpetrated an eerie calm. After a heavy silence, Riveil spoke up as if he were an unskilled backup soldier.

"However, if the Magician Brigade is here when the King of Night regains his power at dawn, then we will be—"

"I don't want to hear it," Ann Duke said, cutting him off in his soft voice. "If you've got to boil him up and eat him, I don't care. I'm just here to save the little girl who he's captured. You're here to capture the demon king, right? Let's simply leave it at that for now."

He never spoke in a harsh tone. However, Riveil kept his complaints to himself and stopped talking.

"…The barrier preparations seem to be complete," Riveil reported in a stately tone.

"I see." Ann Duke nodded slightly. He closed his eyelids as if to doze off.

"Sir Holy Knight!"

It happened as the darkness began to grow deeper.

A giant shadow appeared from within the darkness, and the magicians yelped, getting into a fighting stance with their canes. However, Ann Duke drew his sword faster and struck down the assailing monster in a single blow.

The large creature let out an otherworldly scream, and collapsed.

The magicians were breathless. From the always-kind Ann Duke, they couldn't have imagined such sharp, merciless swordsmanship.

In the darkness, a faint light emanated from the Holy Sword.

"How many of you can invoke magic?" the Holy Knight said, still facing back to the magicians. His low voice took form in the darkness and shook the air.

"Me… Me and these two young men, sir…"

Just three magicians were able to directly invoke magic in capturing the King of Night. The rest were there to amplify and assist this magic power.

It felt to Ann Duke like the hilt of his sword was stuck to his palm. If he closed his eyes, he thought he could hear voices. They called out to the dormant sword, like they had done when he was a young boy.

The moment he pulled the sword from its scabbard, it sharpened his senses, and the world changed to a cold color. Somewhere in his heart, he felt happy that he was annihilating the demon king.

If only he could use this sword that had known nothing but taking lives to save someone. Ann Duke had thoughts like these, but only for a moment.

"I'll cut down all beasts who block our way. Don't step in the range of the sword. I don't need to say you'll get hurt."

He looked back for a split second. Even in the darkness, his eyes sparkled in a deep, brilliant blue.

"Because I won't guarantee your survival."

Riveil was the only one who could manage a nod.

The beginning of the fight had been declared. The Holy Knight drew his sword.

There was no going back now.

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Mimizuku, sleeping at the roots of a giant tree, felt as though she could hear someone screaming desperately, and woke up in a panic.

"Huh? What's going on?"

Something was strange. Despite not knowing what was going on, she looked around restlessly.

The darkness cried out. The trees and the leaves all seemed to be screaming as if they had been shredded.

"What? What is it?"

She looked up at the sky. She couldn't see the moon anywhere. A cold shiver ran down her back.

I have to go!

Mimizuku kicked at the ground, jangling her shackles.

She ran to Fukurou's mansion. He had to be there. Mimizuku didn't have anything beautiful for him today, but even if she was turned away, she just knew that she had to go.

"Wh-What?"

As Mimizuku drew closer to the mansion, she became cognizant of something horrifying.

"Ah… Aaaaaaaaah!!"

She shrieked inhumanly.

The mansion was on fire. The blazing red flames seemed to engulf the mansion as if crowding around it.

Why? Mimizuku thought. *Why?!*

Running closer, she forced open the half-open door and rushed inside. The flames drew closer to the center of the mansion little by little. Mimizuku climbed the staircase, feeling as though she were being burned by hellfire.

She ran to Fukurou's room.

The King of Night stood there, in the center of the room.

"Fukurou… Fukurou! Fukurou!!" Mimizuku yelled. Fukurou slowly turned around. His eyes were an icy gold, and they seemed to quiver as they reflected the redness of the flames.

They betrayed no emotion.

"Fukurou! It's no use! Stop it!!" Mimizuku exclaimed. She slammed her fist against the wall several times, which was peeling because of the fire. Mimizuku forgot the fact that she could get burned.

"Stop it! Stop it!! It's gonna burn up! Your painting's gonna burn up!!"

Smoke entered her lungs and she began to cough violently. Even so, Mimizuku tried to peel the painting off the wall to protect it.

The painting of the red sunset, which would have been finished soon, dispersed into the flames.

"Noooooooooo!!"

Mimizuku howled like an animal. She moved to cast herself into the flames, but Fukurou grabbed her.

"Enough."

Fukurou's cold voice reaching her ears, Mimizuku turned around.

"It's no good! I can't save it!" Mimizuku shouted.

Even though it was so beautiful.

Even though it was a painting you made!

Her scream disappeared into an ominous noise coming from the mansion. It was a low sound like and explosion.

The floor crumbled beneath their feet.

"Gyaah!"

The entire upper half of the mansion fell. The roof had been blown away, so Mimizuku and Fukurou weren't crushed to death. Mimizuku was confused, not knowing who or what caused the explosion.

"Ah… a…"

Her shackles burned red hot.

She felt as thought the entire world was crumbling.

But in the middle of all of this, she thought she could hear something.

Somewhere, someone was saying something.

She heard a voice.

"Over here!"

In her vision of the world burning down, the voice was powerful.

"Over here! Give me your hand!"

On the other side of the mansion's wreckage, someone was standing. It was a man with blond hair and blue eyes, and he was holding his hand out to Mimizuku. He had a sword in one hand, with the other extended out to Mimizuku.

"Huuh!?"

Mimizuku made a strange sound.

"Me!?"

It didn't fit the tenuous scene; it was a wild voice.

"Yes, you! I came to help you!!"

The voice that responded was limitlessly strong.

"Help?"

No one had ever held out their hand to Mimizuku like this before.

"Came to help…?"

She felt as though she had wished it before, long, long ago, when she was small.

She wished someone would take her away. Take her away to happiness.

To… happiness…?

"I… I…"

Her words shivered. To the destiny suddenly held out to her, Mimizuku's body cowered in fear.

"Take my hand! Don't be afraid!"

"But…"

"It's all right!"

Something like this. Strong. Even if it was a lie, for someone to tell her "It's all right!"…

No one had ever said anything like that to her before.

As if being drawn in, Mimizuku took several small steps toward the voice. But she turned around. She looked at Fukurou. It seemed like Fukurou's body was being pulled away by a thin, invisible string.

Fukurou stared sharply at Mimizuku with his eyes like moons. He spoke.

"Go. Girl who names beasts. There is no reason for you to be here anymore."

And then, Fukurou moved unnaturally, and seemingly involuntarily extending his arm, he traced his long finger across Mimizuku's forehead.

After a moment, Mimizuku's body began to move on its own. Alone, but without hesitation, Mimizuku willfully took the hand.

Not the king of monsters', but the Holy Knight's.

The hand that had reached out for her. Warm human skin. It engulfed her. She was lifted up.

She had been saved, as if she were loved.

Even so, for some reason, Mimizuku wanted to cry.

Somehow, and so much, she wanted to cry.

She had an intense headache. Her forehead felt hot. She wanted to scream.

Despite having never known of tears before, she wanted to cry.

. . .Just like that. I wish I could have been eaten by you, just like that.

Chapter 5

Gentle Lapse

THE SOUND OF CHEERS traveled loudly through the room.

All the cabinet ministers and soldiers bent over for a toast.

Overseeing the room on his throne was the gray-haired king.

People congratulated the Magician Brigade on their success, and the Holy Knight for his gallantry. Quick-spirited troubadours began to sing odes in the corners of the hall.

Ann Duke leaned his back against a corner of the hall and looked at the scene from afar.

"Lord Holy Knight! They're having a drinking contest over there! I'm sure you'd drink them all under the table!" a friendly soldier said, coming over to Ann Duke.

"Nah, if I drink too much again, my wife'll get mad," Ann Duke answered with a pitiable smile.

"Can you say hello to her for me?"

"Yeah, sure. There are plenty of people from the temple here today after all. She didn't want to come because she was nervous and said she hated these kinds of things."

"Haha! That's too bad!" the soldier said, disappearing back into the crowd.

They succeeded in the subjugation of the demon king, and the captured girl was saved.

The news traveled through the peasantry in an instant. Even at this very moment, citizens were raising a glass to the success of their kingdom.

Ann Duke didn't shy away from a drink either.

However, the subjugation of the king was yesterday. He wanted to go back to his mansion and rest.

His wife was surely waiting for him to return, and she didn't like to come to celebrations like these where everyone was passing around greetings here and there.

He had thought of being absent under the pretense of rest, however from the standpoint of the kingdom, he was the face of their honor, and there was something he was interested in anyway. He was waiting after the toast for that report.

Eventually, a servant ran up to Ann Duke. He whispered something into his ear. Hearing that, Ann Duke nodded and gave his thanks to the servant.

He then quietly left the hall behind.

If the king knew why he was leaving, there was no way he would have stopped him anyway.

Ann Duke had been waiting for the report that the girl captured by the demon king had regained consciousness.

Passing through a long hallway, knocking on a door with a golden handle, he slowly entered into the room.

There was a single bed underneath a bright chandelier. There, a small girl was laying down on her side.

Ann Duke walked up to the girl. In the bed stuffed with waterfowl feathers, the girl slept as if sinking into it. Her cheeks were miserably thin, and Ann Duke remembered how surprised he had been at her lightness when he had picked her up. The magic flames had been made so that they didn't burn the girl, but she was still a sooty mess.

He ran his fingers through her thin hair, which gave the impression of straw. He pushed her bangs aside and her forehead was revealed. There was a strange pattern on it, and none of the magicians had any idea of what it represented. However, it was definitely the work of the demon king, and there seemed to be no doubt that she was affected by some kind of spell.

"Are you all right? How are you feeling?"

"…"

She then peered through her slightly open eyes, staring fixedly at Ann Duke.

"Ah… a…" she groaned incomprehensibly.

"Yes? What is it?" Ann Duke asked gently.

However, the girl couldn't muster any more words, and she tried to somehow raise her body out of the bed. Struggling from her lack of strength, she took Ann Duke's hand.

"Are you all right? Are you hurting anywhere?"

"N… no."

The girl's voice was slight, like the flapping of insect wings. The wrists that Ann Duke was holding had changed to brown. They had been able to melt the chains off with magic, but they couldn't remove the marks, as she had apparently been wearing them for a very long time. It pained his heart to see that. However, Ann Duke was thankful that she was in good health.

"All right, good."

He heaved a sigh of relief.

The girl hadn't used her brain much, and all she could manage was,

"Where… am I?"

"This is Red Ark Castle. You don't need to worry anymore. There's nothing to be afraid of."

"Nothing… to be… afraid of," she repeated like a parrot.

"Yeah, that's right. I'm Ann Duke. Ann Duke MacValen. What's your name?"

"My… name?"

The girl gently closed her eyes.

Her eyelashes shook as if she were shivering.

She then opened her eyes.

"I forgot my name," she whispered.

To these words, Ann Duke gazed in wonderment. The girl looked at Ann Duke's face with pure, innocent eyes.

Ann Duke nipped at his lip, cast his eyes downward, and shook his head several times.

He then gently embraced the girl's head.

"You poor thing…" he said quietly, in a deep voice.

The girl seemed to tilt her head slightly as she was engulfed in Ann Duke's chest.

She couldn't understand why any of this was being said to her.

The rumors that the King of Night had been suppressed and that the captured girl had been rescued traveled through the region in the blink of an eye.

The people talked of praises for the Magician Brigade and the Holy Knight, and they expressed their sympathy and pity for the girl.

The poets sang their praises along with a note from their harps. They sang of the girl with the strange pattern on her forehead, of her misfortune, and of her cruel destiny. They sang out in a beautiful, melancholy rhythm. They also sang great praises of the heroic deeds of the Holy Knight.

However, there was one thing they never sang of.

They never spoke of the demonic King of Night, and no one knew of his whereabouts.

"Your name is Mimizuku."

One day, a beautiful woman with black hair entered her room of the castle and said this to her in a kind voice. Her hair had been woven into two or three braids, and her eyes, which were the same color as her hair, gave off a brilliant, gentle light.

"Your name is Mimizuku. I heard it from the hunter who had been saved by you earlier when he got lost in the forest."

"Mimizu… ku?"

Mimizuku, sitting on her large bed in a carefree manner, repeated the name. She was wearing a light, thin dress, and a bit of color had returned to her gaunt cheeks.

"Yes. Do you remember?"

"I… I don't understand. But, when you say it… I feel like you might be right. Yeah, my name is Mimizuku," Mimizuku said in a low voice, lowering her eyelids. As if sealing away something important into her heart, she held her hands against her chest.

"I am Orietta. Orietta MacValen. I'm the wife of that lazy Holy Knight. You know of Ann Duke, yes?"

"Yeah, I know Andy."

Ever since Mimizuku had woken up several days earlier, Ann Duke came to visit her every day. Mimizuku slept often, and he would talk with the attendants overseeing Mimizuku's affairs as he stroked her head.

"Yes, I'm the wife of that housekeeping knight. It's a pleasure to meet you, Miss Mimizuku."

Mimizuku shook her outstretched hand. She smiled. Her hand was like a vibrant whitefish as opposed to Mimizuku's, which was like a withered leaf.

Orietta frowned a little after shaking her hand.

"It's nice to meet you, uh…"

"Orietta."

"Yeah, it's nice to meet you, Orietta, Andy's… wife?"

"Yes, unfortunately, that's me."

Unlike her words, Orietta's face was joyful.

"Mimizuku… is it okay if I call you 'Mimizuku'?"

"Uh-huh!"

Mimizuku's eyes sparkled at Orietta's question. Even though they said it was her own name, she felt it to be incredibly precious to be called by it.

"Mimizuku, how do you like living here?"

Being asked "how," Mimizuku tilted her neck. However, she just said what she thought.

"Well, um… There's lots of delicious food. I get lots of pretty things to wear, and everyone's really nice!"

"Is there anything missing?"

"Andy would always ask that! No, there's nothing missing."

Mimizuku shook her head in response. Truly, her lifestyle was more than enough. She would always wonder why they did so much for her.

Probably because they were able to do so much for her, they did just that.

Orietta was smiling at her.

"Have you remembered anything?" she asked in a small voice.

She meant of the days that she had spent before she woke up, in the forest.

Mimizuku didn't have an answer. She shook her head again, but slowly, and with very a different feeling.

Orietta kneeled down on the carpet next to the bed and met eyes with Mimizuku.

"You know, Mimizuku. Up until now, you were in the forest. You were imprisoned by monsters, and your eyes were fearful… That must be why you lost your memory… to protect yourself. Don't push yourself to try to remember. Mimizuku, it might be best to forget. From here on, you have a new life ahead of you!"

The Forest of Night.

Monsters.

Fearful eyes.

The words spun around in the back of Mimizuku's head.

Really?

It might be best to forget.

Re-Really?

"I have… a new life ahead of me?"

"That's right," came the affirmation.

That's right, it's just like that.

Really?

Why?

Deep in her heart, someone was asking.

She heard a jangling noise somewhere far off.

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Along an aged stone path, the smell of mold hung in the air. The ceiling was high, but with no window. With the power of magic, it burned brightly, changing from red to blue. The king moved forward, his footsteps echoing through the room. The magicians flanking him didn't say a single word. The only things that could be heard were shoes hitting the ground and something that sounded like a deep groan.

At the farthest end of the hall, a black shadow was crucified on the wall. When the king stopped, his last step was the most conspicuous of all.

"King of monsters."

The hoarse, but dignified voice arose from the king.

Held in place by a transparent thread, Fukurou was crucified to the wall with his body suspended. His eyes were closed shut, and his wings didn't make the slightest movement.

"Is he conscious?" a magician at the king's side asked.

"Let's see if he can hear us," Riveil answered from underneath his gloomy robe.

"Demon king."

The king spoke strongly. Responding to his voice, or perhaps for another reason, Fukurou lifted open his heavy eyelids.

Silver, faint light flowed from them. They were dimmed due to the influence of the magic power, but

the strength of the light made it clear that he was the ruler of the monsters.

The king took a deep breath, and turned to meet him, unflinching.

"Demon king. How do you feel about being captured by humans?"

He spoke with provocation. However, the demon king ignored his question.

"…The king of humans?"

His voice was deep enough to be felt in the ground.

"Indeed. I am the king of this country, Red Ark."

For a moment, a flicker of emotion seemed to appear in Fukurou's eyes. It was something close to disdain or disgust.

The king thought that he seemed quite human-like.

He didn't think that something belligerent, with purely evil intent, could feel things such as scorn or hatred.

"Do you hate humans? You look like a human, king of monsters. It seems like you enslaved a human girl, is that right? Without killing or using your abilities… were you planning revenge?"

Fukurou responded to the question with a silent rejection, not making the slightest twitch. The king bit down on his molars. Even if he was captured, he didn't think he could keep his dignity as long as Fukurou did.

It couldn't be helped. His enemy was a monster, after all.

"Whatever. The girl is receiving diligent care in the castle. That girl lost her memories, but that's convenient for her, considering that her lifestyle will be fortunate and renewed from now on. Demon king. Your expectations were completely off the mark."

Fukurou didn't answer. He simply closed his eyes again, as if he had lost interest. The king exchanged glances with the magicians, and the reverentially held out a large crystal orb.

The crystal was bright with magic power, and a red flame swayed inside of it. With its beautiful handiwork and the magic power, those who looked at it were taken in by its mystique.

"This flame represents your magic power. When the flame changes from red to blue, your magic power will be depleted, your body will dry up, and you will become a mummy representing the power of this country's magic."

The king explained all of this casually, and even though he was giving Fukurou a death sentence, Fukurou did not make a response and remained silent.

Running out of things to say, the king turned on his heel, and went back the way he came. To the sound of his footsteps disappearing in the distance, a voice suddenly arose.

"Human king."

The king stopped. Retaining his majesty as best he could, he slowly turned around. He met with Fukurou's silver eyes once again.

"Human king. Which do you value more: you, or your country?"

It was the first question asked by the king of monsters to the king of humans. The king of humans scowled and gave a response with no hesitation.

"That question is meaningless, demon king. Those two things are incomparable. I will, at any time, choose my country. So long as I am myself, I will choose my country."

So long as he had the will, he wouldn't even put them in the same league.

Fukurou closed his eyes to the king's response, and became silent, as if sleeping.

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The blue sky, marked with only a few thin clouds, wrapped over the bustling castle town market.

"W-Wah…!"

Standing at the entrance to the market, Mimizuku's sanpaku eyes were wide open.

"There are so many people!"

"It's the first time you've seen just this many people in one place?" Ann Duke asked, smiling. He was standing beside her.

"It's definitely the first time!" Mimizuku answered.

"Well then, grab onto my hand so that you won't get lost, okay?" Orietta said. She was standing opposite to Ann Duke. She took Mimizuku's small hand. Mimizuku blinked several times, but then smiled joyfully.

Today was the first time that Mimizuku had left the castle.

She wore clothes that were not flashy, but decidedly well made, along with a hat to match. Ann Duke and Orietta escorted her.

"Hey, Orietta! Everyone's carrying lots of stuff!"

"Yes, this is a shopping area after all," Orietta said, wondering if Mimizuku understood.

Mimizuku, finding it difficult to comprehend, tilted her neck.

"You buy things you want in exchange for money. Here, Mimizuku, open up your hand."

Orietta placed three coins in Mimizuku's empty hand.

They had engravings of pigeons on them, and they seemed to Mimizuku like treasures.

"Use these."

"Pay? With money? For something I want?"

"That's right, something that you want."

"Something I want…"

Mimizuku thought for a bit.

Ann Duke laughed.

"Go look around, first!" he said, pushing Mimizuku's back. In the market stalls were fresh fruits and vegetables, beautiful fabrics, and fine objects that Mimizuku had never seen before.

Mimizuku looked around; most of what she saw was completely new to her.

"Oh my, hello, Lady Orietta!"

Suddenly, a voice arose from a stall to the side. A woman who had come to sell wheat flour appeared before Orietta.

"You're with Lord Holy Knight as well? I'm so jealous of how well you two get along…"

Saying this, the lady gave a hearty laugh.

"Whether or not we get along, he's coming with me today. Whatever I buy, I don't have to worry about bringing them back home, so long as he's here!" Orietta said, putting forth her best smile.

"Ahaha, no mistaking that! Say, Orietta, who's this child?"

The woman looked down to Mimizuku. Mimizuku looked up at Orietta, wondering what she should do.

"Lady Orietta, you've already had a child this big?"

"Isn't she cute?" Orietta answered with a smile, ignoring the woman's second comment.

Before she knew it, Orietta had let go of her hand, and was lightly touching her back. Mimizuku felt as though she meant that she should go, so with her

heart beating loudly, she mixed into the crowd between the street stalls. Greeting people here and there, Ann Duke watched her small figure to make sure that he wouldn't lose sight of her.

After bumping into several people, Mimizuku found herself standing in front of a single stall. She stopped for a rest, and found herself smelling the sweet scents emanating from the stall.

"Hey, little miss! Want something to eat?" the proprietor said to Mimizuku courteously. Mimizuku panicked a little.

"Will it taste good?"

"Have a bit and see! Here, eat."

Wrapped in dark colored paper was a cooked fruit dipped in sugar. When she took a bite, warm sweetness and fruit juice mixed in her mouth.

Mimizuku's eyes sparkled.

"Delicious!!"

"Is that so, is that so!"

To Mimizuku's response, the man grew even more spirited.

Without taking a breath, Mimizuku bit into the fruit. After wildly proclaiming its deliciousness, a crowd of adults had soon gathered around her.

"It's even better than the food in the castle!" Mimizuku said truthfully. The crowd was suddenly thrown into a state of excitement.

"That kind of praise is beyond anything I could ask for!"

"Little girl, aren't you going a bit far in your laudation?"

"But it's true! It's amazingly delicious!"

Mimizuku responded honestly even though she didn't know the person who had talked to her.

"Man, now I have to try too!"

Mimizuku's brazenness brought in plenty of customers. When Mimizuku saw their fingers handing over the coins, she suddenly panicked.

"Oh, that's right! Don't I have to give you money?"

The stall owner's hands were already full, and he gave a laugh.

"I don't need any, miss! I'm fine with just you saying that my food is delicious!"

The crowd extolled his generosity, and they showed it through their willingness to purchase more.

"No, that's no good. Orietta said I have to exchange money!"

The crowd was shocked by Mimizuku's utterance of the name.

"What? Are you an acquaintance of Lady Orietta? The candidate for Maiden of the Temple, is it…?"

An old woman then walked up to Mimizuku.

"Look, your mouth is a mess. Hold on a moment, I'll wipe it off for you."

Extending her gentle, wrinkly hand, she wiped the area around Mimizuku's mouth. She had eaten so quickly that bits of food were all over her face. Everyone gave her kind smiles.

"There, now you're all clean. Oh my, what's this? On your forehead…"

The old woman moved Mimizuku's bangs to the side. What appeared was the strange pattern.

"You… it can't be…"

The old lady swallowed her breath, and the crowd turned silent for a moment. Mimizuku stood there, looking at all of them with a puzzled face.

"Young lady… are you... a princess?" the old lady asked, her finger trembling.

"Hm? I do live in the castle, but I'm not a princess."

The crowd stirred.

"No, that's not what I meant. You, who was saved in the demon king's subjugation, are the princess of the Forest of Night…?"

"Huh? Um, maybe? I…"

To those words, the crowd murmured excessively.

Even though she didn't really understand, and even though she wasn't a princess, she had a feeling as though it was just as she was told. Mimizuku remembered what Orietta had explained to her before.

"Aah!"

The old woman suddenly yelled, and then embraced Mimizuku tightly.

"Wh-Wh—"

"You've come back alive. I was so afraid, this is wonderful!"

"Uh, um—"

Hugging Mimizuku, tears began to fall from the old woman's eyes. Mimizuku felt confused as the drops began to fall onto her shoulders.

"It's the princess! The princess saved from the Forest of Night is here!"

Joyous voices could be heard. Mimizuku was jostled about, being touched and hugged by various people. In a nervous flutter, she shook hands with several people.

What's going on?

Mimizuku's heart began to beat louder and faster.

It was warm.

What was going on here?

After a while, Ann Duke emerged from the crowd and took Mimizuku with him.

The hands she felt were warm.

"Hey, Ann Duke."

"Hm? What is it?"

"That old woman was all worried. Because of me."

"Yeah, she was crying."

"Crying…"

"Her tears were flowing for your sake," Ann Duke said with a kind smile.

What were tears?

But they were warm. They were affectionate. When she thought of this, her sinuses cleared and her nose felt fresh.

Generally, Mimizuku was obedient as someone who was living in the castle for nothing in return. She never had more free time or boredom than she knew what to do with. She liked to sleep in her bed, and she enjoyed looking at the scenery from her window, and she loved talking to the attendants who occasionally stopped by. Everyone was kind to her, and Ann Duke and Orietta were like family.

There was even one time where she had talked to the king.

"It is the first time that we meet like this, Mimizuku."

The gray-haired king arrived in Mimizuku's room with several attendants. Ann Duke was beside her, and he whispered to her that he was "the highest man in the country."

"Ah, uh, nice to meet you!"

"Hmph… I see you've become quite energetic."

"I, uh, you've done so much to help me!"

"I don't really care about that. I will give you all the care that you need."

Their exchange ended there, and finishing up with her, the king took on a severe expression. Mimizuku asked Ann Duke if the king was angry, and Ann Duke laughed.

"With that face, he's just troubled by something is all."

"Yeah, it looks like that kind of face," Mimizuku agreed.

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Several days later, a single servant visited Mimizuku.

"Lady Mimizuku, I have brought you this."

The servant held out a collection of keys.

"What's this?"

"They are the keys to the tower in the west."

"Hm? The tower in the west?"

"The person living in that tower would like to meet Lady Mimizuku, I am to report."

"Me? Why?"

The old servant simply smiled.

"Please, take this and go."

He handed her a ring of keys that shone dully. Mimizuku took them without much feeling.

"Understood! I'll go!" she responded, grinning widely.

She listened as the servant told her the road to take. He then disappeared back into the hallway. As she watched his back grow farther and farther away, Mimizuku sighed.

The entrance to the west tower required several keys. Testing out the keys on the different locks one after the other, she eventually opened the door. There was a soldier standing right next to her when she entered, but with a single glance and Mimizuku's keys, he simply greeted her with no other comment and without turning to look at her, allowing her to go further in on her own.

When she opened the door, there was a long, winding staircase.

Mimizuku ran up the staircase without any hesitation. She remembered to roll up the hem of her plain dress as she went up the steps.

As she caught her breath at the top of the stairs, she came to a well-crafted oak door.

Well…

Mimizuku knocked on the door three times, copying what the castle dwellers did whenever they entered her own room.

"Who is it?"

She was startled by the voice she heard from inside.

"I'm Mimizuku."

There was no other way of saying it.

"Come in."

Receiving permission, Mimizuku entered inside. When she opened the door, a wide room spread out before her. It was easily twice the size of Mimizuku's room.

There was a latticed window, a bookshelf, a large bed, and plush toys and figures of soldiers.

In the center of the room, sitting in a strangely shaped chair, was a shadow.

"What's wrong? Why won't you enter?"

She heard a voice from the chair. It was high, like a girl's voice. Sitting in the chair with a large wheel attached to it was a small shadow.

It had thin, discolored arms and legs.

It had light hair and eyes, and a small body. His hair color seemed to remind Mimizuku of someone.

"I'm glad to meet you, Mimizuku."

Sitting with his back straight in the chair was a boy who seemed to be more or less ten years old. He was faintly smiling.

"I am Claudius. Claudius Vain Yordelta Red Ark."

Mimizuku blinked.

"I am… the prince of this country."

With his light hair gleaming from the elegant chandelier, Mimizuku thought he looked quite similar to the king.

Chapter 6

Seal of the King of Night

CLAUDIUS ASKED MIMIZUKU TO SIT on the carpet next to him. Mimizuku responded to his request without hesitation. Ever since she began to live in the castle, sitting on carpets was one of her favorite things, though she was often chided by the maids for doing so.

Here, however, there was no one to tell her off.

Sitting down directly onto the carpet, Mimizuku looked up at the boy prince, who seemed small even to her. Claudius was sitting in a chair much larger than himself, seeming to drown in its plush exterior.

"Show me your mark," Claudius said, just moving the end of his mouth.

Mimizuku obediently removed her hat and showed him her forehead.

"That's a really strange pattern…"

"Eheheh!" Mimizuku laughed.

"Show me your wrists and ankles."

Just as she was told, she extended her arms to show him her wrists, and stretched out her knees to show her ankles.

"They're really discolored."

"Orietta said they can't make it go away."

"So you were in shackles?"

"Yeah, that's right. They were rusted away, or they said something like that."

"Don't you have trouble moving?"

"Trouble? Hm… They don't hurt, so I guess they don't give me any trouble?"

"…I see."

With that, Claudius gave a light smile. It was a smile of a certain kind that Mimizuku had not seen much. Mimizuku couldn't even tell if he was smiling in the first place.

"If that's the case, then I'm even worse off."

"Okay?"

"Aren't my arms and legs disgustingly discolored?"

"Yeah."

Mimizuku nodded frankly. She didn't know what "ugly" meant, but they certainly were a color that she had never seen before.

"This is how I've been ever since I was born. I haven't been able to move my arms and legs, ever."

"You can't move them?"

"That's right. Even though I went so far as to take my mother's life to be born… like this, I'll surely cause grief to the kingdom."

Saying those words, Claudius averted his gaze from Mimizuku and cast his eyes downward.

"It's as if my body is cursed. Like this, I can't be seen by the citizens of the kingdom. If they say I'm crippled, everyone will get scared. Therefore, ever since my birth, I've been kept in this room, almost never leaving."

Mimizuku opened her mouth wide in amazement, causing Claudius to smile, in that same way that she couldn't tell if he was smiling or not.

"So, you would say I'm unfortunate, right?" Claudius asked.

Mimizuku slanted her head to the side.

"Unfortunate?"

"That's right."

Unfortunate is when you're unhappy. *Since the prince called himself unfortunate, maybe he really is?* Mimizuku thought.

But why is he asking me?

"So, how was it? You, being captured by the King of Night, I mean. Do you think you're more unfortunate than me?" Claudius said, glaring at Mimizuku with a spiteful expression on his face.

"Um…"

Mimizuku wasn't taken aback by Claudius's appearance.

"I'm happy? In this castle, I'm happy, I think?" she spoke absentmindedly.

Mimizuku's words seemed to stab a hole in Claudius. He opened his dull emerald eyes wide.

"I was told it's thanks to His Majesty, but I suppose you had a part in it too," Mimizuku said with a smile. Claudius looked away.

"…I don't have any authority at all."

Mimizuku, who didn't know what "authority" meant, suddenly stood up. She didn't receive permission from Claudius, but the view of the sunset from the large window was so beautiful to her.

"Wow! Incredible!" Mimizuku shouted with joy.

"Incredible, incredible! There's such a great view from here! Hey, you can even see the market!"

"Mimizuku, I'm not finished ta—!"

His words disappeared unfinished into Mimizuku's shouting.

"Hey, hey! The baked fruits in that stall over there are so delicious! Have you ever eaten them?" Mimizuku asked insouciantly. Claudius's face twisted.

"I already said! I can't ever leave here!!"

"So you haven't? All right then, I'll buy some for you! I'm good friends with the man there!" Mimizuku exclaimed, beaming.

Claudius opened his mouth to say something to her, but he closed it, hesitating.

"…You'll… buy me some?" he asked meekly.

"Yeah! I'll buy you some! They're really good. There are also lots of beautiful and fun things there too." Mimizuku nodded several times. She felt very content. She remembered how happy the man at the stand was when she said the fruit was delicious.

Claudius looked up at Mimizuku. It was a forlorn gaze, as if he was clinging to Mimizuku.

"You…"

"Yes?"

"Don't you commiserate me?"

"C… commiserate?"

Mimizuku cocked her neck like a bird.

"Wouldn't you say I'm pitiable?"

"Um… you're pitiable?"

Claudius blushed in an instant and looked away. It seemed that having his question reflected back at him caused him embarrassment.

"I've been called pitiable too, though I don't get what's so pitiable about me," Mimizuku said, smiling broadly. Claudius stared at her face timidly.

"…Hey, Mimizuku."

"Yes?"

"Tell me about what goes on around the castle. Of what's outside, tell me what's beautiful, what's interesting, and what's wonderful," he spoke, his voice like a whisper.

Mimizuku lightly nodded her head at his request.

"Yeah, all right! I'll tell you all about it. And I'll bring you something delicious! There are lots of surprising things in the town. And then there are lots of pretty things too!"

"…"

Claudius was silent, and he hung his head far downward.

"Uh… Mimizuku?"

"Yeah?"

"Will you, um…"

The ears poking out from between strands of his hair turned red.

"Will you… be my friend?"

Mimizuku grinned at his question.

"What's a friend?" she responded innocently, refreshingly.

Claudius looked up and gave an uneasy laugh. It was the first time Mimizuku had seen him laugh.

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That day, when the king had finished his governmental affairs, he headed to the reception room to find Ann Duke lounging on his sofa. This was what greeted him after a day of exhausting work. He thought of lighting a fire and sticking it to the nose of Ann Duke's sleeping face, but he considered that he was up against someone who lived by the sword and thought better of it. He couldn't get careless.

"You, over there, homestayer. If you don't want to lose your job, get out of here right now," he said in a deep voice.

"All right, all right…" the lounger said in a drowsy voice, lifting his body from the sofa. The ill-mannered Holy Knight had always found this sofa to be particularly snug.

"What are you even here for?"

"Just taking a nap."

"Get out."

"Yeah, sure. I was about to go home anyway. If I'm home too late, my wife gets mad, you know?" Ann Duke said in a relaxed manner while standing up. He then suddenly remembered something.

"By the way, have you heard the talk that Dia and Mimizuku are getting friendly with one another?"

"…I have."

"Hmm? So it was your suggestion?"

"Claudius is the one who said he wanted to meet the 'captured princess.'"

"Heh… He didn't get what he bargained for, as usual. Actually, nah, it's okay. I was a little surprised when I heard that they met, but I think it's a good idea too."

The king turned his cold eyes toward Ann Duke, who was stretching out like a cat.

"So, what are you trying to say?"

Ann Duke made a troubled face as if he was searching for the right words, and then slowly opened his lips.

"Shouldn't you look after Dia a little more? Stop keeping him locked up in that place. If you stopped hesitating over suddenly exposing him to the public, he'd be in a nice boarding school somewhere by now. Do you know Remit Island? It's an island far from the border, but the schools there are supposed to be excellent."

Whether the king was listening to Ann Duke or not, he did not look at him.

Ann Duke sighed, and then continued.

"Hey, even though Dia has a body like that… he's very smart, you know."

"…"

The king responded with silence.

Ann Duke heaved another sigh, and changed the direction of the conversation.

"How's the Demon King Mummification Plan going?"

"Ah, yes. No delays so far."

"I see… Well, that's good, I guess."

The king had lifted the sluggish paralysis of the previous conversation, changing the tone of his voice.

"What do you want to say?"

"Well, it's just… I think this whole thing is going a little too smoothly. I mean we are dealing with the demon king, after all."

He was the king that had had ruled the forest of monsters for a period of several hundred years. It was oddly unbecoming of him to fall into human hands so easily.

Even when they were subjugating him, they had felt that way.

"That is simply because this country's Magician Brigade wields a great amount of power."

The king's response was firm.

"Then that's fine, right? By the way, what do you plan on doing with the magic power that you squeeze out of the demon king anyway?" Ann Duke asked with a light tone of voice.

"It will be put to use for the sake of the country."

"I see."

Ann Duke nodded to the king's unenthusiastic response, and after a single farewell, left the reception room as he always did.

As the king listened to his footsteps grow farther away, he closed his eyes tightly and let out a small sigh.

"Aileidia…"

It was a beautiful name. As he spoke it, its owner, a stunning woman, became reborn in his mind. The only portraits of her were in the reception room and

the bedroom. There, smiling at him now, was the deceased queen. She was a fine woman who, even though her body was weak, loved both king and country. Rather than living for even a second more, she chose to bring forth new life. She had only one answer to those who disrupted her in childbirth.

"I want to become the one and only queen of this country."

She was dead now, and she was the only queen ever since.

The prince also had to bear the burden of the country all by himself.

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"Prince! Look at this, I picked it up at the edge of the country."

"What is this?"

Claudius looked at the transparent, yellow lump that Mimizuku held out to him.

"It's a liquid that came from a tree, and then became solid. Look, that's a bug in there, isn't it?"

"It's true…"

Claudius squinted at the lump.

"It looks kind of like honey. It thought it would be sweet, so I licked it, but it turned out to be not so tasty…"

"I wouldn't do anything like that."

"I see, I guess that's just you," Mimizuku said, chuckling. Once every three days, Mimizuku visited Claudius in his room. There were times when there were others, like teachers, already in Claudius's room, but the moment he saw Mimizuku's face, he bid them to leave.

"Mimizuku, I will give you the honor of calling me by my own name."

"Huh?"

"As thanks… for everything. You don't have to call me prince, Claudius is okay…"

Being told she could call him by name, Mimizuku blinked with surprise. However, she thought that Claudius's name was too long and hard to say.

She called Andy as such because Ann Duke was too hard to call him by.

"All right, since you're Claudius, I'll call you Kuro[7]—"

She stopped talking suddenly, and became completely still.

Huh?

Something seemed to ring inside of her head.

Ku… ro…

That's wrong, someone in her head was saying.

She couldn't call him by that. Not that name.

Not that name.

"Kuro? Don't shorten my name to something seedy like that. If you want to… you can call me 'Dia' like

[7] Claudius's Nickname: When written in katakana, Claudius's name is クロディアス (Kurodiasu), the first two letters of which are "ku" and "ro," thus explaining Mimizuku's choice of nickname.

Andy and the others do," Claudius said, his face becoming dim.

"Dia?"

"Yes, that's right. Dia. This is… the name I received from my mother."

"Your mother?"

Claudius cast his gaze downward.

"After having me, she died. I killed her."

"You… killed her?"

Mimizuku tilted her neck to the side.

"Yes, that's right. I killed her. My mother's body was weak. She didn't have any resistance to magic power. Her body was put under pressure by the growing magical power in this country. The truth is, her body was never fit to have a child at all."

Hmph, Mimizuku thought. *How does that mean that Claudius killed her?*

"But didn't she want to have you, Dia?"

"If that was the case, then it would have been fine, I think."

Claudius's face grew deformed as he spoke.

"However, I have this kind of body. The king too, he neglects me…"

"Neglects?"

Mimizuku turned her head to the side. She didn't know the word.

"…It means he hates me, Mimizuku."

"Eh? I really don't understand, though…" Mimizuku gave a hearty smile. "Even if you're hated, I think it's still best to live. And also, I don't hate you, Dia!"

Claudius narrowed his eyes painfully at her words.

"…Mimizuku, have you been hated too?" he sighed.

"Umm…"

Mimizuku looked down, slightly, meekly.

"I don't remember."

Claudius thought that her faced seemed to look as if she were crying.

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One day, Ann Duke came into Mimizuku's room to find her with her elbows on the windowsill, engrossed in gazing up at the sky.

"Mimizuku? Is there something interesting outside?"

"I was just thinking, there's no moon," she said faintly, not turning around.

"Moon? It's still noon, you know."

"Yeah. White. I want to see it. Gold is fine too."

"Hm. You really seem to like the moon, huh Mimizuku?"

For some reason, as he said this, Mimizuku's face became gloomy.

"Yeah, sort of. It's somehow… nostalgic," she whispered as if letting out a deep breath.

"Hey Orietta, I've been thinking…"

Returning to his own mansion, Ann Duke, throwing his feet up, sat down on the sofa and began to talk.

"Yes?" Orietta replied, continuing her work in her account book.

"I've been wondering if Mimizuku is happy, not having her memories."

"…"

Orietta's hand stopped.

Ann Duke closed his eyes and continued.

"I've been wondering if it's good for someone to forget a difficult past so frivolously. For example, doesn't happiness come from seeing that sparkle rise above after tears and toil? Isn't that where human strength comes from?"

"…Hey, Andy," Orietta said in a faint voice.

"Hm?"

When Ann Duke looked up, Orietta had stood up and was pulling a document off of the bookshelf. It appeared to be a very old transcript.

"I've been quiet about it, but I can't help myself. I tried taking a look through some of the old books in the temple."

In the temple's underground library, there were documents easily several hundred years old securely stored. They were not meant for the eyes of the gen-

eral public, but Orietta, as the Maiden of the Holy Sword, had a strong influence in the matters of the temple, and was able to enter the underground library.

"What do you mean, 'took a look'?"

"The symbol on Mimizuku's head… I tried to figure out just what kind of magic spell was cast on her."

"Did you figure it out?"

Orietta moved quietly beside Ann Duke, bending down on her knees and lowering her long eyelashes.

"It's the sign of the end of the waxing and waning of the moon."

She slowly opened the aged text. There, on the yellowed parchment, drawn out in cracked up ink, was without a doubt the symbol on Mimizuku's forehead.

"That is, the seal of memory imprisonment."

Ann Duke opened his eyes wide. He covered his mouth, disbelieving, and then his face transformed into a scowl.

"How insidious!! Those monsters captured Mimizuku, and then erased her memories!?" Ann Duke spat.

"No."

Orietta firmly denied his speculation.

"No, that's not what it is. The sequence of events is strange. Mimizuku also forgot what happened in the forest. The magic spell was invoked the moment she left the forest…"

Ann Duke suddenly remembered.

The forest had been burning. There, there was a girl cowering in the middle of it all.

There was a loud cry of pain.

She had called out for someone.

His hand covering his mouth, his eyes wandered downward as he sighed to himself.

"To the monsters… would there have been any convenience in sealing them off?"

"I wonder… We don't know the true intentions of the demon king. We only know that Mimizuku losing

her memory was not of her own will…" Orietta said, closing her eyes.

"Is there any way to get her memories back?" Ann Duke asked.

"I think there's value in attempting to do so. However, I don't know if it's really for the best. Her body was malnourished, and she has those marks from the chains on her wrists and ankles… It probably wasn't the most enjoyable life for her. On top of that, we're dealing with the king of monsters… That's not something that we can oppose naturally. But if she wishes for it… then probably, it will be up to Mimizuku's will if everything works out or not."

"What do you want to do?" Ann Duke asked frankly.

Mimizuku made a confused facial expression.

Ann Duke smiled at her to relieve her hesitation.

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"It's okay if you don't want to do it. This is your life, after all. Even if you've lost your memories, you can still become happy, right?"

However, Mimizuku was worried about something completely different.

"If they dispel the magic, will the pattern on my forehead disappear?" Mimizuku asked nervously. Ann Duke raised an eyebrow at her.

"No, it'll just erase the effect… Unfortunately, I don't think it'll get rid of the seal…"

"All right then! I'll do it!" Mimizuku replied quickly. She smiled, her eyes sparkling.

"Mimizuku, do you like that symbol?"

With a pure hearted smile, Mimizuku laughed.

"Yeah! It's pretty, after all."

Ann Duke knocked the door. He received the expected "Who is it?" replying with "It's me." As usual, he immediately received permission to enter.

"Hey, it's been a while."

Ann Duke raised his hand and smiled, causing Claudius to crack a smile as well. It was difficult to

say if it was befitting of someone his age or not, but it was a small token of a smile.

"You don't have any teachers this time of day?"

"Yeah, none."

"I see."

"Hey, Andy."

Claudius, who usually simply listened to what Ann Duke had to say, took hold of the conversation in a rare moment.

"How is Mii?"

"Mii?"

Ann Duke tilted his neck for a moment, but quickly realized whom he was talking about and smiled.

"Ah, you mean Mimizuku?"

"Y-Yeah…"

Claudius nodded, his cheeks turning slightly red.

Even this boy can make such a rich facial expression, Ann Duke mused quietly, growing a bit excited.

"It seems like you've become good friends. Did Mimizuku visit you today?"

"Yeah. She said they're trying to dispel the magic enchantment laid upon her. Will Mimizuku's memory come back?"

"I'm not sure. At this point, Riveil and the others have been working on her for a whole day. My wife's accompanying them too."

"I see…"

"So you've really been getting friendly with her, huh?" Ann Duke said, unable to hold in a wide grin.

Claudius averted his gaze downward.

"That girl is so strange. She has absolutely no shame, and no pity. She's always smiling."

"…Dia. Do you want to be pitied?"

Claudius raised his head quickly to respond to Ann Duke, but it seemed like his throat was clogged with words, so he closed his mouth.

Then, the words slowly began to drip out, bit by bit.

"I don't understand. Mii says that she's in no way unhappy. When I see that, I… I…"

It seemed like he couldn't say anything more.

Ann Duke quietly drew closer, and gave Claudius a couple of gentle pats on the head.

Ann Duke, Orietta, and the gray-haired king were the only people who could lay a hand on the prince in such a way. When Ann Duke first met Claudius, he was still a baby with crimson hands. He had watched over him as he had grown. Claudius had a special significance to a couple like Ann Duke and Orietta, who had no children of their own.

"If Mimizuku's memories return…" Ann Duke said gently, "she may not be the same Mimizuku that we know now."

"…Huh?"

Claudius looked up, slightly taken aback.

"A person's memory is the one definite substance of their character. The Mimizuku whose memories have returned may be a completely different person from the Mimizuku we know now…"

"I don't want anything like that!!" Claudius shouted unthinkingly.

Ann Duke smiled as if to pacify him.

"But still, I think it would be good for you to make the new Mimizuku your friend as well. Isn't that right?"

"That is… yeah…"

Biting his lip, Claudius nodded. Ann Duke, nodding heavily, continued to talk.

"If Mimizuku's memories return, and she still wants to stay in this country with us… I think I'll make her my daughter."

Claudius's eyes grew wide at Ann Duke's words.

Ann Duke smiled somewhat shyly.

"Of course, only if Mimizuku is okay with it," he added.

"…I want to too…" Claudius looked down and muttered.

"Hm?"

"I wish I could have been born as your and Orietta's child…" he cried out in a tiny voice, like a mosquito's buzz. Ann Duke gave him a strange look.

"You hate your father?"

"I don't hate him!" Claudius yelled. "It's not that I hate him! But for a prince like me to be born like this, I'll only bring unhappiness to the country! For someone like me, who came into this world by killing his own mother…"

Ann Duke smiled and slowly shook his head.

"Don't put your parents on a pedestal like that."

"But…"

"Hey, Claudius."

Ann Duke took a step toward the windowsill, turning his back to Claudius.

"Do you think things would be better if you could move your arms and legs?"

"…Yes. That's what I want. But no matter what this country's magicians do, there's no way they can make my arms and legs move."

"Are you certain of that?"

"Is there a way!?" Claudius asked, clinging to Ann Duke's words.

"If we had a strong magical power, there could be…" Ann Duke said quietly without turning around.

"Where could anyone get magical power like that!?" Claudius shouted, biting his lip.

Ann Duke turned around and patted Claudius's head once more.

"I'll come again," he said softly.

Even after Ann Duke had removed his hand, Claudius continued to face downward.

"…If I could meet Mii… I'll wait for her to come… Tell her…" He spoke in fragmented sentences. He seemed like he was going to cry, but he was a boy who resisted the urge to shed tears.

After all, he couldn't wipe them away.

"I promise I'll tell her," Ann Duke nodded, exiting Claudius's room.

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"Mimizuku, how are you feeling?" Orietta asked Mimizuku, who had just finished a full day of treatment for the purpose of dispelling her curse.

Ann Duke looked on from beside her.

As expected, the King of Night's seal could not be completely dispelled.

"Frankly, we just can't break through the last wall," Riveil, the head of the Magician Brigade, had said.

"However, the seal is on its last legs… From the tear we have made in it, there is a possibility that her memory will be reborn."

Buried in her bed, Mimizuku sluggishly closed her eyes.

"My head hurts…"

"Are you okay?"

With her small body, it was undoubtedly a heavy burden to bear.

"Yeah. I had a dream."

"What kind of dream?" Orietta asked.

Mimizuku opened her dry lips.

"Someone was speaking to me. Forget. Forget. I didn't want to. Don't screw around with me, idiot. Why do I have to forget?"

Seeing Mimizuku say such harsh words in monotone made Orietta smile.

"You don't seem like the usual Mimizuku."

"It's definitely me," Mimizuku answered clearly. "That was my voice."

"Don't screw around with me, idiot…" she said once more, as if to confirm it was really her.

The next day, a rare guest was summoned to Mimizuku's room in the castle.

"Ah, it's been a while. Yep, it was definitely you."

With great humility, he stepped timidly onto the castle's carpet, and couldn't help but crack a smile when he saw Mimizuku. With his plump body and simple clothes, his appearance seemed quite unnatural against the castle's white walls.

"I wonder if you remember me. You and I met in the forest."

"Huh?"

Sitting in her bed, Mimizuku tilted her neck.

Orietta, who had brought the man with her, stepped closer to Mimizuku.

"Mr. Shiira, please tell her in detail what occurred that time."

"Yes, Lady Orietta."

The man called Shiira placed his hat upon his chest and deeply lowered his head to Orietta, then turned to Mimizuku.

"I was in trouble, lost in the forest, but then you suddenly came and spoke to me. I thought you were a monster, and I became very unnerved. But then… you called me 'Grandpa.'"

"Grandpa," Mimizuku parroted back.

Shiira smiled and nodded several times.

"That's right. You then gave me directions. 'Go straight down this river,' you said. Thanks to those words, I was able to get out of the forest."

"Straight down the river…"

"I asked, 'What about you?' But then you misunderstood and answered with your name. I asked in a sense of 'What are you going to do,' but you said 'I'm Mimizuku.'"

"I'm… Mimizuku…"

Something in her head rang out.

Hm? I'm Mimizuku!

That voice. Whose voice was it?

"Then I asked, 'Aren't you going to come with me?' But you were delivering a flower, so you said you couldn't. You were holding a very red flower. You gave me the stamen, saying it would ward off monsters."

As Shiira followed his memories, he carefully described the scene.

"Very red…"

"Your hand was soaked with blood. It was an incredibly red flower, like nothing I had seen before."

"Red… flower…"

Sweat began to run down Mimizuku's back. Her heart began to beat faster.

"You said something like… yes, yes, now I remember. You said you had to bring that flower to Fukurou. Mimizuku and Fukurou are associated with each other, so I remembered what you said well."

"Fukurou."

All right! Fukurou! I'll call you Fukurou!

The night was deep.

The darkness was thick.

The moon, was beautiful.

“Fukurou… Fukurou…”

“Mimizuku? What’s wrong? Are you okay, Mimizuku?” Orietta asked from beside her. Mimizuku didn’t respond, she simply muttered the name to herself over and over.

“Oh? Excuse me, but it seems like the pattern on your head has changed, hasn’t it?” Shiira said, taking a closer look at Mimizuku.

“What was there before!?” Orietta asked, surprised.

“Um… when I saw it, it wasn’t a pattern, but numbers. Three… 333? No, it was different. It was 332, I think…”

“I’m number three hundred thirty two!”

That was mine.

My number.

“No… no…”

Mimizuku’s eyes flew open, and she placed her hands over her ears.

Orietta called her name. However, her words

never reached Mimizuku's ears.

"Noooooooooooooooo!!!!"

Mimizuku shrieked in anguish, as though she were dying.

Just like she had on the day she had separated from Fukurou.

Mimizuku vomited. As she cried, she vomited until she was expelling nothing but gastric juices. Orietta held onto her back, but she continued to vomit.

As the muddy waters of her memory engulfed her, she continued to vomit.

She recalled all of her memories once more. She remembered where and when, what she felt, and what she killed.

She couldn't deny her memories. The pain, the suffering. Now, she understood. She understood how closely she had skirted death when she lived in the village. It had all come back to her again.

She couldn't turn away from it anymore. She couldn't abandon her memories any longer.

As she recalled, she searched desperately.

There had to be a time when someone was kind to me.

When was it? Surely, it was somewhere.

I was… treated kindly.

Two moons…

Silver. And then, gold. Moons.

The jangling sound of her shackles. The sound of Mimizuku's world.

Fukurou.

She yelled it out into the recesses of her heart.

"How could I forget…"

Mimizuku rolled her hands into fists and screamed.

"Don't just selfishly erase people's memories like that, Fukurou! You idiooooooooot!!"

And then, beside Orietta and her pared eyes, Mimizuku lost consciousness and collapsed.

Meanwhile, underneath the castle, Fukurou, who's vitality and magical power were being squeezed out of him little by little, gave a subdued sigh.

"The idiot is you. Foolish girl…"

It was a small utterance, and no one was there to hear it.

Chapter 7

Knight and Maiden

IT HAPPENED SOON AFTER the Holy Woman of the Sword had been inaugurated, at the end of the queen's funeral.

It was on a path through a grassy field leading to the castle. The sky was clear and blue, just like the old pastoral songs would describe.

"Do you want to be free?"

A boy grabbed the arm of a beautiful girl in a broken carriage.

"Right now, you're stuck in a cage. Do you want to be free?" the boy asked.

The girl laughed. She twisted her lips as if to ridicule the boy's naïveté and lack of restraint. It was an unbecoming laugh for the Maiden of the Holy Sword.

"If I could be free, I would have done so long ago."

Ann Duke was at first taken aback by her response. But then he smiled and nodded.

It was just a single chance meeting.

In that moment, his kindness gazed upon the future, and her strength pulled it closer.

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In the stone hallway connecting the castle and the temple, a shadow proceeded straight through.

"Get out of the way!!"

With this single exclamation, the soldiers on duty stood down and opened the door. The shadow continued into the dark room, lit only by a magic square, without hesitation.

"Lady Orietta…!"

“What is the meaning of this!?” she shouted loudly amongst the magicians making a stir. Her hair was a mess due to lack of sleep. Her face was deep with the color of fatigue. However, the light in her eyes was strong.

“Explain this! Who started this disgusting activity!?”

“It was the on the orders of the king.”

Riveil was the one who spoke up.

“Sir Riveil! Are you telling me that even you supported this!?”

“We were simply acting on the king’s orders.”

“Forget about him, then! Stop this horrible undertaking immediately!”

Orietta entered the center of the magic square. Several of the magicians could be seen shivering. The Holy Knight Ann Duke and the Maiden of the Holy Sword Orietta were given special privileges due to their social status. They were occasionally given more authority in certain matters than the king’s closest retainers.

The only one amongst the magicians who could speak to Orietta as an equal was Riveil.

"Please stop, Lady Orietta! The magical technique is still being executed. If we stop the procedure, then some unfortunate reaction might occur in Lady Mimizuku's body due to the roughness of our knowledge regarding the matter," Riveil said in a reserved tone, though hoarsely enough to make one feel that it was dignified.

Orietta's index finger stopped.

She was seemed to be running it across the reflective surface of the magic square.

"Lady Orietta… please understand! We, as the ones who carried this out, will take responsibility of…"

"Would you not complain if someone stepped across your memories?" Orietta asked. Her obsidian eyes had tears floating in them.

"Please understand. This too was for the country's sake…"

Riveil lowered his head deeply.

"Get out."

With her long, slender finger, Orietta pointed at the door.

"I will deal with you later. If you don't want to incite the rage of my husband, get out of this room immediately!"

The magicians could not oppose those words. Everyone bowed to Orietta, and then left the room.

Only Orietta remained in the room. She stared at the shining surface of the magic square as if clinging to it.

Orietta remembered her reason for coming here. When Mimizuku had suddenly lashed out, there was a faint presence of magical power in her. Orietta had been a top grade student of magic arts at the temple, and her genius in magic allowed her to sense the slight fluctuations of magic around Mimizuku.

Someone, somewhere, was reading Mimizuku's memories.

Mimizuku's memory itself was like a kaleidoscope, changing the scenery several times.

Orietta pursed her lips and made certain of what she was seeing.

Whatever was going on, she would put a stop to it.

If she loved Mimizuku, then that was what she needed to do.

After hearing that Mimizuku's memories had returned, Ann Duke ran back to the castle again.

When he opened the door, the first thing that leapt out at him was Mimizuku, screaming bloody murder.

"Where's Fukurou!?" Mimizuku yelled, grabbing at the attendants around her.

"Fukurou! Where's Fukurou!? What are they doing to him!?"

Ann Duke stopped without thinking upon seeing her menacing look. With her eyes wide open and her hair spinning wildly about in her corybantic rampage, she looked like a feral beast.

"No! Give him back! Give Fukurou back!!"

Mimizuku didn't seem to take any notice of what was around her. She simply called out for someone named "Fukurou" and thrashed about.

"The Mimizuku whose memories have returned may be a completely different person from the Mimizuku we know now…"

Ann Duke remembered his own words.

He thought that her mind might have slipped off into some far off emptiness, but still…

"Mimizuku!!"

Ann Duke raised his voice.

Even though Mimizuku had not been here for long, the days they had spent together were definite. In those few days, Mimizuku had smiled and felt happiness, and nothing could take that away.

Riding on a sliver of hope, Ann Duke called her name out.

Her motions stopped all at once. The attendants, worn out from being bitten and scratched, gazed at Ann Duke as though they received salvation.

"Mimizuku, it's all right. There's nothing to be afraid of," Ann Duke said in the quietest voice he could muster, slowly walking toward Mimizuku as if pacifying an injured beast.

Mimizuku, in a daze, stared at Ann Duke. She slowly blinked two or three times.

There was a sudden sparkle. Her expression had gone through innumerable changes. It was a mix of sadness, happiness, and pain. She then made a disjointed, disfigured face, as though she were making an impossible decision.

"An… dy…"

"Yes, what is it?"

Ann Duke then slowly ran his hand through Mimizuku's hair, drawing in close. It was at that moment.

In a more subdued action than her rampaging, Mimizuku flung off Ann Duke's hand.

Ann Duke, taken aback, closed his eyes dejectedly.

Mimizuku looked up at Ann Duke, glaring with her whole eye from the brow down. In her eyes was

an unmistakable will. It wasn't hate. It was an amalgam of regret and misery.

"Leave," Mimizuku declared clearly. "Leave, Ann Duke."

"Mimizuku…"

"Get the hell out! I don't want you, or anyone else in here! Just leave me alone!"

The face of the one who said those words was not someone that Ann Duke knew. The Mimizuku that Ann Duke once knew was in a fleeting dream, with her innocent smile and her docile surprise.

He never thought she could have made as strong a face as she was making now.

"Mimizuku… should I leave you alone?" he asked, still unsure. Mimizuku pouted her lips and rolled her hands into fists.

"Please, leave me alone."

"I understand… I'll go."

Upon gently saying these words, Ann Duke made the attendants bow and leave. Ann Duke looked be-

hind him one more time and spoke to Mimizuku, who was standing starkly in the center of the room.

"Mimizuku, please don't forget one thing."

No matter what kind of memories Mimizuku had, no matter what kind of world she lived in.

"We love you."

Don't forget it.

Hearing those words, Mimizuku cupped her face in her hands and turned away. She turned as if trying to shake off the memories of Ann Duke and the others.

Making a dull, quiet sound, the door closed behind her.

With that sound, Mimizuku collapsed onto the floor and gave a tiny, tiny sigh.

"…I love you too… Andy…"

Ooh…

These warm drops were tears.

"But I can't forgive you."

I love you, but I won't forgive you.

"I will absolutely never forgive you for burning Fukurou's painting…"

Where are you?

Sighing to herself, Mimizuku cried, thinking only of Fukurou.

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That night, Mimizuku turned on the lamp at her bedside and sat down in her bed. There had been food delivered to her, but she didn't feel like eating, so she just drank water.

Mimizuku thought. She got lost in thought. Mimizuku hadn't used her brain often throughout her life, but for the sake of Fukurou, and for her own sake, she thought. She thought of what she had to do.

On top of her bed, she sat down neatly on her knees. She wiped her tears. She didn't want to be seen with such a pathetic face.

She then clearly spoke.

"Come out, Kuro."

She waited for several seconds. There was no response.

However, Mimizuku did not have any doubts.

"Kuro!!"

She simply called out his name.

Poof!

Kuro's small form, quivering before her eyes like a flame, appeared with a small sound.

His form was different from how Mimizuku had always seen him in the forest, as his body was translucent and his existence could only be felt faintly. However, the way he scratched his cheek with his upper right hand and the crunching sound it made confirmed him to be Kuro.

"It's been a while," Mimizuku said, still with slightly teary eyes.

"I did not think that we would meet again. Mimizuku."

The way his voice rattled her eardrums, that was definitely Kuro.

"Why?" Mimizuku asked tremblingly.

"It is up to the world in which we live," Kuro responded indifferently.

"Is it because I lost my memories?"

"You could say that."

"Don't mess with me, Kuro."

Mimizuku's voice was low, and her words were heavy with accusation.

Then, as if opening a dam, Mimizuku leaned toward Kuro and let loose her thoughts.

"Ugh!! Why did Fukurou do something so idiotic!? I can't, I just can't believe it!! Was I really that much of a bother to him!? I know I was annoying! I know it, I know, I know, but… to go that far…"

Small pools of tears began to form in Mimizuku's eyes.

"Am I really… that… unwanted? Was I… really… that much trouble…?"

Mimizuku had known how impudent and brazen the things she that day in the forest were. Mimizuku had known a lot ever since long before, since before she had even come to the forest.

She had felt as thought the pain would rip her in half.

She felt that if she remembered the past for even a moment, her mind and body would be torn apart by the pain.

However, she couldn't fall. She couldn't shed off the world she lived in, now matter how much she wanted to.

Because she had to see Fukurou again.

Kuro didn't answer Mimizuku's question. He simply stared up at her with those eyes whose expression was impossible to read.

"…You know, Kuro," Mimizuku said weakly as she wiped her tears.

"Fukurou's been captured. What should I do? Fukurou's been taken away from me…"

"I have indeed heard that the king has been captured by human hands."

"Yeah, that's right. Aren't the other monsters going to help him?"

"They cannot do that."

"Why?"

"Look at this body, Mimizuku."

Kuro then spread his four arms out wide. His body was dim and quivering, and Mimizuku could see through it.

"Right now, a strong spiritual barrier has been erected around this country. In the castle as well. Around the underground area where the king is held as well. I have managed to slip in through a hole in the web, but I cannot remain here for long."

"…So the monsters can't come here?"

"Aye." Kuro nodded. "However, that is not the immediate reason."

"What do you mean?" Mimizuku responded.

Kuro opened his pomegranate-like mouth.

"You humans underestimate the power of the Lord of Moonlight!" he said as if shouting. He shook his bat-like wings, but they did not make their usual flapping sound.

"Even if he is captured on the night of the new moon, when his power is weak for a short period of

time! Who do you think he is!? The king of the Ieri, the King of Night! When the full moon appears, even if he is held down, he could burn this town, this entire country, to the ground!"

There, Kuro suddenly stopped moving.

"…However, the Lord of Moonlight did not do that."

"Y… yeah…"

Even Mimizuku understood what Kuro meant. From the very beginning, she had mulled over the fact that if Kuro wouldn't eat her, what monster would?

"This country being here right now. That in itself is the will of the Lord of Moonlight, and no matter what the Ieri wish, they cannot bend that will…"

"Then they've abandoned the King of Night!?" Mimizuku yelled without thinking.

Kuro lowered his head as if to escape Mimizuku's vision.

"The King of Night is indestructible."

"But!"

"Even if the current king is killed, allow time to pass, and magic power will gather in the earth, bringing about the birth of another king. That is how it is arranged."

"Then you *are* abandoning Fukurou!"

Kuro didn't answer.

As the flame in the lamp flickered, a fitting silence spread through the dark night. The moon from outside the window was large to the point of imbalance, but beautiful.

Finally, Kuro spoke.

"…There is nothing that I can do."

Mimizuku bit her lip at his response.

Well then, she thought.

What can I do?

From the start it was wished that she would do something. Wished for by her own self, who had had her memories erased. Even if she thought and acted for Fukurou, she would just be neglected again, right?

Neglected…

Mimizuku finally understood what the word meant. Curling her hands into fists against her knees, she bared her teeth and thought.

The old Mimizuku in the forest would have never thought like this. She would live without thinking of the contents of others' hearts, and simply did what she wanted, which was to be told to do things by others. Mimizuku, who had come to know what it was like to be loved, was now afraid of not being loved, and she had come to know herself better because of this.

Understanding so much… it's sad…

Even so, she didn't think to go back. She didn't want to go back to that time, when the only thing she understood was pain.

She wanted to rescue Fukurou.

She wished to go back, but with all her knowledge of happiness and sadness and tears. She wished to go back to the forest together with Fukurou.

Even so… she thought.

Even so, her memories ran about her. The ones of the forest, the ones of that village, and—the ones of this country.

Ann Duke caressed her kindly.

Orietta embraced her gently.

Claudius became her friend.

In this lifestyle, everyone was kind to her. Who would it help for her to turn around and kick sand in the faces of all these people?

Even Fukurou might not wish to be saved. She might be rejected again, even if she went and saved him.

If Fukurou rejected her again like he had in the forest, would her current self really be able to handle it?

Living here, eating the delicious food, being treated kindly, being happy.

"That's right, Mimizuku," Kuro said, gently interrupting Mimizuku's thoughts. Startled, Mimizuku looked up.

"One moon ago, on the orders of the Lord of Moonlight, went to retrieve this. Hold out your hand. Mimizuku."

"Huh?"

A single strand of hair fell into Mimizuku's outstretched hand. It was somewhat dull, red hair.

"What's this?"

She felt like she had seen it somewhere before. But where?

"I confirmed it on the orders of the Lord of Moonlight. This is proof. The man whose stomach you stabbed… still lives.

"Huh…?"

Mimizuku opened her eyes wide with surprise.

What does he mean?

Mimizuku looked at the strand of hair in her hand. This color was definitely it. That's right. The man inscribed on the last page of her bloodstained memories of the village.

He lived.

She hadn't known if it was true or not. If she were to doubt it, she would have had no proof, and if she had lied to herself, then she could have brandished a weapon as much as she liked. However, Kuro had confirmed that the man was alive for her.

Mimizuku hadn't killed anyone.

And Fukurou had made the order.

"Ah…"

Mimizuku tightened her grip on the hair, rolling her hand into a first around it, and placed it against her forehead.

How difficult to comprehend. How easily defeated were her notions, how unskilled.

And yet…

He had always treated me kindly.

Mimizuku understood.

He had always, as much as he could, treated me kindly.

She understood it now.

Warm drops of water began to fall. She wasn't sad, but they still fell.

"I must go. Mimizuku."

"Oh… Kuro…!"

Mimizuku looked up and saw that Kuro's figure was quivering unstably.

"I am sorry, but there was a limit from the start. If I use any further magic power, I may be detected."

And then, Kuro hesitated for just a moment. Mimizuku thought she saw him smile.

"Now, Mimizuku. If fate allow it… let us meet again.

"Wait! Wait, Kuro! Please, just tell me one thing!"

She told herself not to cry, but the tears wouldn't stop fast enough.

I wish I could burn Kuro's shape into my eyes more clearly, more strongly…

"Just tell me one thing! Kuro… is Fukurou important to you!? Or… or is he just important to you because he's your king, and not because he's Fukurou…!?"

Kuro's form was already paler than the morning mist, but he still answered Mimizuku clearly.

"That is right."

Mimizuku's face twisted.

"It is just as you say, Mimizuku."

That was how Kuro answered. However, Kuro's form had already disappeared, and his true last words remained in Mimizuku's ears.

"However… the paintings drawn by the king… are incomparably beautiful. That is what I think."

Those were Kuro's last words.

Alone, remaining in silence with only the light of the lamp, Mimizuku sat quietly, and finally wiped her tears with the back of her hand. She looked up out of the window at the moon.

It was as beautiful as Fukurou's eyes.

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That day, Ann Duke went to the king's office. As he entered, the king did not stop his hand or look up from his documents.

Ann Duke slammed his palms down on the king's well-made, lacquered desk. It made a low thump.

His eyes burned blue, and his face had lost some color.

"Release the King of Night this instant!" Ann Duke said in a deep voice.

"I can't do that."

The king didn't look up, and his response showed that he knew everything that had happened.

"Why!? You've known the whole time, haven't you! You've been receiving reports from your magicians, right!?"

Overcome with impatience, Ann Duke grabbed the king's collar.

"…Let go of me."

The king's voice was also deep, and cold.

"Try raising a hand against me in this place. I have something that I cannot let go of as well. If you take your wife and leave this country, I will round up your remaining family and have them all beheaded and put on display as a warning. Are you prepared for that?"

Ann Duke felt a lump in his throat, and make a sound. He knew that the king was serious, and not merely tossing an empty threat.

He slowly removed his hand. The king still did not look up.

"…What reason could you possibly have for imprisoning that monster when he's done nothing to hurt us?"

"Monsters are monsters, and thus evil. That in itself is the reason."

"You can't be serious!!" Ann Duke shouted.

His wife had returned home late the night before and told him everything without wiping her tears. There was no way he could have stood by without doing anything.

The path Mimizuku had walked up to this point was nothing short of heroic.

"Between the degenerate humans who hurt her, and the King of Night who cared for her, tell me, which one is really evil!?"

"You are the one who carried out the subjugation of the demon king, Sir Ann Duke.

Ann Duke nodded. He was ready to accept his sin.

"That's right. That's why I'm the one telling you now, let the King of Night go free!"

However, the king did not give in.

"I cannot do that."

"Why?"

"Too much time has already passed. At the next full moon, in just a few days, the mummification of the King of Night will be complete. If we released him now, he wouldn't live long."

"Then shouldn't you give him back his magic power!?"

"Are you sane, Ann Duke?" The gray-haired king lowered his eyelids and shook his head. "Try it. If the demon king gets his power back, he will bring all of his monsters to this country and attack."

"The King of Night isn't just an ordinary monster. If you speak with him, maybe you'll understand…"

"What a naïve thing to say. Ann Duke, with that kind of thinking, you'll expose this country and all of its citizens to danger."

Being bored through by the light of the king's sharp eyes, it was Ann Duke's turn to lower his eyelids.

"I'll protect them," he said, gritting his teeth.

He dropped the palms of his hands onto the desk, hanging his head.

"I'll protect all the citizens… and this country…" he sputtered out, although with a strong tone of voice.

The king thought it would be overdoing it to reject those words. He looked straight down at Ann Duke.

Since long before, the MacValen name had been famous in this country. When the youngest brother pulled the Holy Sword from the scabbard, his elder brother immediately complained to the king. "My younger brother is too kind to hold that sword!" he had said. The oldest, who was head of the MacValen

household at the time, had declared that "My younger brother is too rigid to hold that sword!"

The king now knew that neither of them was wrong. He was both too kind, and at the same time too rigid, when wielding the sword.

His sword was a sword that did not balk at the act of murder, and he himself was not one to let his heart go out to the life that he had cast away.

Even so, the Holy Knight was able to become a "symbol" of this country, because he found something that he must protect. The wife he loved, his family, and his country.

So the king placed his hand firmly on Ann Duke's shoulder.

"The king of this country… is me," the king declared, as if pressing for an answer.

"Let us recognize that there was a misunderstanding. Even so, there is no way to undo what has already been done. The subjugation of the demon king is something that we have been seeking for a very long time. In order to bring about prosperity for this

country, we must make clear our magic power, and for that, we need a large amount of magic. All of this is for the sake of the country."

Ann Duke ground his teeth together. The king's words were not without meaning. The king was a man who placed the country before everything else. That was why he was king, and why the country was where it was.

"With the King of Night's magic power…" Ann Duke said in an accusing tone, "Do you plan to heal Dia's arms and legs?"

He had always known. But he couldn't say it. He knew though, that if the king were to obtain such a large amount of magic power, Claudius would be his utmost priority.

"It's for the sake… of the country." Immediately after speaking, the king shifted his gaze. "I do not plan to give up the throne to anyone but Dia. However, if I died, I'm afraid with that body of his… he wouldn't be able to protect the whole country. If I can do anything at all, then I will do it. I've developed an

army, and pushed for agricultural and commercial growth. However, with that body… with his arms and legs, I don't know if he can stand the pressure of the throne."

Ann Duke could not criticize the hapless king any further.

The king could not help but love his own son. Even Ann Duke, who had no children of his own, understood how painful it was.

"What will become of Mimizuku?" Even so, he could not give in. "Even now, that girl is still crying, looking for the King of Night. What will become of her?"

What would become of Mimizuku, who cried out in pain just remembering the King of Night?

The king let out a single sigh.

"Ann Duke. You're telling me that if the King of Night was to be freed, and he went back to that forest with her, Mimizuku would be happy? If Mimizuku returned to that forest, she'd be happy? Is that really what you're losing your patience over?" At those

words, Ann Duke's face became dim. "Do you really think that monster would want a single little human girl to be happy?"

"But! Even so…"

The king turned his back to Ann Duke, who would still not give in.

The king looked down at the town from his office window.

"You raise her, Ann Duke. If you do that, then that girl will have no more troubles in her life. Give her happiness by your hand," the king said in a somewhat gentler tone.

Because the king's back was turned to him, Ann Duke wasn't able to see what kind of face the king had when he said those words.

"…"

"A person's happiness lies in other people, Ann Duke," the king, who had one child of his own, said.

Ann Duke bit his lip. He closed his eyes tightly.

He wanted to bring Mimizuku happiness. If he could, he would do it by his own hand. She had been

reborn before Ann Duke as a nameless girl with pure-hearted eyes. Maybe it was fate. Maybe she appeared for the sake of his love and affection.

He thought that he would teach that poor, small girl of a brilliance many times greater than merely living. He thought that it would be wonderful if he could save this girl, who didn't even know the meaning of tears.

But who would understand?

Why are others able to limit the happiness of a single human being?

"You will be attending the ceremony on the next night of the full moon, Holy Knight Ann Duke," the king said in a voice teeming with severity. "The one to finally stab the demon king's heart… will be you."

Ann Duke closed his eyes tightly upon hearing those words. He curled his hands into fists just as tightly.

"…As you wish…" he answered in a cracked voice, as if he were spewing blood. "…My king, Dantes."

That was the seldom spoken name of the king.

"I wanted to be a friend to you… Ann Duke."

Ann Duke then turned his own back to the king.

He never turned back.

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The one who brought Mimizuku her lukewarm soup that day was not the usual attendant.

"Mimizuku, how are you feeling?"

Mimizuku kept her back turned to any guests, but she reflexively turned around upon hearing that familiar, gentle voice.

"…Orietta."

It was Orietta, who was smiling and holding a tray.

"Why are you making that face? Do you want to get even thinner?"

"…"

Mimizuku looked down without answering. Interposing the large, canopy-affixed bed, she turned away.

Orietta smiled as if sighing, and placed tray with the soup bowl on it at the side of the bed.

She then turned around and sat down on the bed. Mimizuku had her back turned to Orietta, but she could still feel the vibration.

"Hey, Mimizuku," Orietta said in the gentlest voice she could muster, as she always did. "Would you like to become our daughter?"

Mimizuku blinked several times at Orietta's words.

"You know, I don't have a daughter, let alone one as big as you," Orietta said, giggling. She then lowered her eyelids a little. "My body can't have children."

Suddenly, Mimizuku's heart rang out.

It hurts, she thought. Something inside of her hurt badly.

Orietta slowly began to speak, as if she were telling a small child a fairy tale.

"It can't be helped, but that's how it is. I'm the 'Maiden of the Sword.' I, along with the sword, am offered to the chosen hero—nothing more."

While listening to her words, Mimizuku thought of Orietta.

Orietta's indigo eyes resembled the night sky. Mimizuku found them very nostalgic.

They were the same color as Fukurou's hair.

Orietta continued to speak, as if singing.

"Whether I live or die is up to the hero. I'm no different than a slave!"

Mimizuku shivered at the mention of the word "slave." A cold sweat ran across her back. *Now,* she thought. *Why now?*

Orietta chuckled. It seemed like she did, at least.

"But Ann Duke told me that… he told me, all the fortunes that he received from being chosen by the Holy Sword as the Holy Knight… he would give them all to me."

For some reason, Mimizuku's world began to waver incessantly.

Before Mimizuku's eyes expanded a scene of some happening long ago. Specks of flame. Two moons in the night sky.

"'Go wherever you like. You're free now,' he said."

"Go. Girl who names beasts. There is no reason for you to be here anymore."

It was him.

He was the reason she had been there from the start.

"You're free."

"Why?" Orietta said, gazing at Ann Duke. She acted brave, straightening her back.

It was the second time the two had spoken. It had only been a few days since the incident with the carriage.

Ann Duke was still young, and Orietta was still small.

"I'm yours."

That was how she had been raised. Born as an infant, raised in an orphanage, and handed over to the temple after her genius with magic had been discov-

ered, she underwent rigorous studies in the magic arts in order to become the priestess to defend the Holy Sword. In the process, she lost the ability to have children, but she thought little of it.

"If so, then go beyond the horizon. I won't do anything about it."

"Why?"

Orietta's face grew twisted.

She didn't know what kind of face to make.

"Why are you telling me something like this?"

"You told me before. 'If I could be free, I would have done so long ago.' Since I can, I'm releasing you from your birdcage."

"But you don't gain anything from it…"

Ann Duke shrugged his shoulders.

"I don't lose anything either. I'm the good-for-nothing son of a knight family. Actually, there is one thing I'm losing. By letting you go, I'm missing my chance with a beautiful girl… But even so, I want you to smile. So that's that."

And then, Ann Duke looked deeply into Orietta's eyes.

"If it forces one woman to become a sacrifice, then the Holy Sword is not so holy anymore, is it?"

At those words, Orietta's shoulders slumped straight down.

Oh, I see…

This was without a doubt the man "chosen" by the Holy Sword.

"Where should I go?"

"Eh, as if I knew."

"I see. Well then, where do you live?"

"Huh?"

Ann Duke left his mouth hanging half-open. To that miserable look, Orietta struck a daunting pose.

"I asked you where your house is. I've always wanted to cook and clean on my own. If it's all right with you, please hire me."

"…Are you serious?"

"Completely. Of course, only if your mansion is fairly comfortable."

Then, Orietta gave a hearty smile.

"I don't care if you hire me or give me up."

"Orietta…"

Mimizuku gasped.

"Even though you were free, why didn't you go anywhere?"

Orietta turned around and faced Mimizuku's small, rolled up back.

"Well," she said, "even if I choose not to go anywhere, isn't that a choice I made freely?"

Mimizuku covered her face with her hands. Tears began to drip from her eyes.

She thought of Orietta.

She thought of Fukurou.

She thought of what Orietta said, about how not going anywhere was a choice you can make freely as well.

Fukurou.

She called out his name.

Hey, Fukurou.

Where did you tell me to go?

That time, I would have chosen to stay by your side.

Is it all right for me to stay by your side?

No, that's not right. She didn't need permission from anyone. Hadn't she made the decision that day? Among the rustling of the Forest of Night.

Even if you don't allow me, I'll be by your side. Eat me, King of Night.

She knew what crying was. She had been taught. She remembered.

"Uuu… uuu…"

For some reason, her chest felt tight.

Her throat felt like it was burning, and she couldn't breathe. Suddenly, gently, she smelled a serene scent.

She was being embraced softly from behind by Orietta. She gently caressed her head, and she understood that Orietta too was crying.

Mimizuku wanted to shake her off. She had to shake her off. However, Orietta, quivering, spoke.

"You've done so well…"

Orietta's arms were warm.

"You've done so well… to live up to this point…"

Those words broke the dam. Mimizuku cried, and cried.

"It wasn't that bad…" she said, sobbing uncontrollably. She had never thought it had been so tough.

Even though she lived the life she did, she never thought it was difficult. And then, every day she had spent since coming to the Forest of Night had been enjoyable.

"Hey… hey, Orietta…"

"Yes?"

"Can I ask you something?"

"What is it?" Orietta asked, patting Mimizuku on the back.

"When I received all those pretty clothes, and all those good things to eat, and when everyone was nice to me, what was I supposed to say to all that?"

Orietta smiled at Mimizuku's question.

"At times like that, you're supposed to say 'thank you.'"

"Thank… you…"

That's right, there was a word for that. Mimizuku held on to Orietta's hand and said it.

"Thank you, thank you, thank you, Orietta."

She cried as she spoke. She had to say it. She had to say it.

Thank you, thank you, thank you, thank you…

Her thoughts overflowed. Her words overflowed.

"Mimizuku?"

"Uuu… ugh… Th-Th-Thank… y-you… Kuro… Fuku… rou… thank you…"

Mimizuku then collapsed, and wailed as if lost in a dream.

"Thank you! Thank you…!!"

She was happy.

She was incredibly happy.

Even though you didn't do anything for me…

You listened to my story.

With his cold eyes, beautiful like moons, he looked at Mimizuku.

I existed in those eyes.

It was the first time she knew she was alive.

Thank you.

"I… I miss yooooooouuu!"

There's something I have to tell you.

Orietta, as though she had made a decision, embraced Mimizuku more tightly.

Chapter 8

Deliverance II

THAT NIGHT, just as Claudius was about to fall asleep, he heard a noise amidst his slumber.

"Who's there?"

Opening his eyelids, Claudius quietly requested a confirmation of identity. He couldn't be careless. It was when he was careless that he was most vulnerable.

"Do you realize you're in the room of the prince? If you take another step into my quarters, you'll be put under a curse by this country's greatest magicians."

Even so, if the person had come this far prepared to throw away their life, they wouldn't have any problem harming the prince. As an alarm bell rang silently

in his heart, Claudius strained his eyes in the pitch-blackness.

There was a small, human figure.

"Sorry for coming so late at night, Dia."

The slight voice was like a small, round bell being rolled gently across the floor.

"…Mii? Is that you, Mii?" Claudius asked, bewildered. He thought he felt her nod.

"Yeah. Sorry, during the day, they had me under watch, so I wasn't able to come until late at night."

"You were being watched?"

"Sort of. They didn't say I couldn't go anywhere, though. The guy at the bottom of your tower let me through."

"I see…" Claudius responded in a complex mental state. Several different words said by various people ran about in his mind. "Mimizuku… I was waiting for you."

"I know. Thank you."

Mimizuku seemed to nod. She also seemed to be smiling, just a little.

"Andy and Orietta came here and told me about you. I thought you wouldn't be coming to see me anymore."

"Why?"

Hidden in the cloth of his bed's canopy overhang, Claudius couldn't see Mimizuku's face, and thus was unaware of just how much Mimizuku had changed since retrieving her memories.

He closed his eyes in the darkness. Nothing changed. Whether his eyes were open or closed, the world was still the same color.

"The king came by today. He said that the last ceremony in the destruction of the King of Night is being held tomorrow, and that I have to come… He said I had to participate, as the next king."

Claudius had understood what the king meant.

The day before, Ann Duke had come and told him. He knew of the whole situation. Ann Duke told him of Mimizuku's situation, of the meaning of the seal on her forehead, and the reason why she had scars on her wrists and ankles.

And then, Ann Duke told him this: *"You're going to be called for a ceremony two days from now, Claudius. Burn my actions that day into your memory. However… if you can, please don't tell Mimizuku about this."*

Ann Duke had worn a sad smile as he said those words.

"I figured I'd become notorious and hated eventually, anyway. It can't be helped…"

Claudius had asked what he could do to help.

Ann Duke simply smiled. He smiled as if he was holding down what he truly wanted to say.

"Dia, you might be able to move your arms and legs soon."

"I don't care what happens to me," Claudius had said. Ann Duke patted him on the head.

"Don't say things like that. The king wants you to be able to move your arms and legs freely so that you'll have more confidence in yourself."

Confidence in himself? Moving his arms and legs would give him confidence? Could he become king just by moving his arms and legs?

"You know, Claudius," Mimizuku said in a trembling voice. Claudius opened his ears so as to not let any of her voice escape him. "You know…" Even in the dark, Mimizuku's silhouette was small.

Even though he was close to gaining free movement of his limbs, Claudius could only think of Mimizuku.

Is Mii crying? he thought.

Then, in a trembling voice like a whisper, Mimizuku spoke.

"What would you do… if I asked you to help me?"

Claudius smiled before he could say anything.

He knew what his answer would be long ago.

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A tricolor bell rang with a pristine sound. As he heard it ring, Ann Duke thought of the dead queen's funeral.

That time, Ann Duke had not yet been chosen as the Holy Knight. He had watched the endless proces-

sion absentmindedly of people in black dress from the top of a tree in the garden in his mansion.

Even though he was high up, he couldn't see the inside of the coffin from among the procession. He was disappointed, as it had been said that the queen was a rare beauty.

However.

Ann Duke raised his head, and gazed upon Fukurou, who seemed to create a throne of his own with his outstretched wings.

Two moons had passed since he had been captured. Since then, he was given nothing to eat or drink, simply hung as if to dry and wrung completely clean of magic power.

However… his figure, eyelids lowered, thin and withered, was still coldly beautiful.

Before such ghastly beauty, even the Holy Knight shivered.

"Holy Woman! Bring the sword here…" King Dantes said in a low voice. Without any wasted effort, Orietta kneeled down beside Ann Duke. She

closed her eyes, and offered the Holy Sword to her husband.

He didn't think she would come.

That was what Ann Duke had truly felt. Since he told her that he was to wield the sword on the last day of the demon king's suppression, she hadn't listened to a word he said.

However, Orietta could not say no in the end either.

"…Are you okay with this?" Ann Duke whispered the moment he grabbed hold of the sword.

Orietta sighed, her eyes still closed.

"I live as one with the sword…"

Hearing her answer, Ann Duke made a pained facial expression. If he could do anything about it, he didn't want Orietta to be forced to say such things.

He grasped the hilt of the sword, and unsheathed it in one swift movement.

Two magic lamps reflected the light of the full moon onto the Holy Sword, causing to give off a dim aura. The thing that shined the most brilliantly in the

ceremony was the crystal surrounded by the magicians. It was a bit larger than a human head, and a burning blue flame flickered inside of it.

There was no magical power left in the King of Night at this point.

The crown said to be for the next king gave off an intimidating air.

"Bring me my prince!"

At the order of the king, Claudius arrived on a sedan chair many times larger than his body held up by several men. Covered by a canopy even as he was taken underground, Claudius's lips were pursed. He looked first at the king, and then at Fukurou.

The magicians stepped forward. From here they would, using the magical power of the demon king, perform the largest magical undertaking in the history of their country.

Their aim was the complete resuscitation of Claudius's unrestrained use over his arms and legs, all the way to his fingertips.

It was right when the magicians took their stances with their rods.

"Please wait."

Having not made a sound up to this point, Claudius broke the silence in the empty air with his high voice. Ann Duke unthinkingly turned to look at him.

"Your Highness," Claudius said clearly, meeting eyes with the gray-haired king. "I would like to see the demon king clearly with my own eyes."

"…What?" Dantes growled.

However, Claudius, unabashedly and buried in his chair, raised his voice again.

"Before he is stabbed by the Holy Sword of the Holy Knight Ann Duke, I wish to be allowed to burn the shape of this future symbol of our kingdom's magic power into my eyes…"

The gray-haired king glared fixedly at his son. However, Claudius did not lower his gaze. Dantes wondered when his son had become so courageous. He felt like Claudius was not the same son he had always had, who always looked up at him coweringly.

"All right." The king nodded. "Bring Claudius forward!"

The men brought the sedan chair holding the prince forward. They placed him gently on the straight, red carpet. The prince then stared carefully, though from a distance, at Fukurou. He stared at the body, the wings of which seemed to be held up by invisible threads. The figure had not lost its majesty.

He looked at it as though searing its shape into his mind.

Just as Dantes was about to continue on with the proceedings, Claudius suddenly shouted something.

"Mimizuku, now!"

Nobody there could deny the sound that entered their ears. They simply stood wide-eyed in amazement. The cloth at the bottom of Claudius's sedan chair had been ripped open.

Then, a shadow jumped out from inside.

"Mimizuku!!" Ann Duke yelled. Like the time when she was just skin and bones with one thin cloth over her, Mimizuku jumped out like a bullet and ran.

"Stop! Stop that girl!!" Dantes' voice boomed like cannon fire. Taken aback, the magicians took fighting stances. However, they were the same magicians who had already set up to perform the revitalization of Claudius's limbs. It would take time for them to cast another spell.

Ahead of everyone else, Ann Duke ran toward Mimizuku.

However, his arm was suddenly pulled on from behind.

"Urk!"

He looked to his side. There, with a strong look in her eyes, was his wife.

"Let me go ahead, Andy."

"What are you going to do!?" Ann Duke said.

"I'll show you. Watch my back!"

Orietta's words were strong. Her grip on Ann Duke's wrists was tight, making it hard for him to refuse her.

Impelled by his impatience, Ann Duke looked at Mimizuku.

Mimizuku ran. Wholeheartedly, she ran. To Fukurou, the beautiful King of Night.

“Fukurou!!”

She called out his name with her whole heart.

She grasped a knife, holding its radiant silver hilt to her chest.

Orietta stood at the entrance in her full priestess uniform, looking at Mimizuku. She saw that she had exchanged her old clothes for a thin, white cloth.

“Mimizuku…”

“Orietta, I’m sorry,” Mimizuku said. “I have to go.”

“Go ahead, Mimizuku,” she said, smiling and crying at the same time.

Looking at Orietta’s teary face, Mimizuku also felt like crying.

“You know…” Tears began to parcel out of Mimizuku’s eyes. She didn’t continue her words. Orietta embraced her compassionately.

“…if I had a daughter, I think this is how things would probably turn out, don’t you?”

She had given up on having a child of her own. She had previously cried and apologized to Ann Duke for it. Ann Duke loved her, and she loved Ann Duke, so she apologized whenever she cried to him. Ann Duke didn't blame Orietta. He was fully aware of what she had been through.

They weren't able to take a child from the orphanage, as they were to consider the country their child.

"I'm sorry, Orietta."

"You don't need to apologize," Orietta said, wrapping her arms strongly around Mimizuku's back.

"You know, I… I… I was happy wearing the pretty clothes I got. Everyone's cooking was delicious. The bed was soft and fluffy, and everything made me really happy.

It wasn't a lie. Her feelings were definitely real.

"That's right…" Orietta's affirmation seemed brimming with all the affection of the Holy Mother.

She's just like a real mother, Mimizuku thought.

I don't know, I don't understand, but it must be something like this, right? This is what having a mother is like…?

Even so.

"But, even so… I want to go home." She had a place to return to. "I want to go back to Fukurou's forest… I must be an idiot…"

I'm sorry, I'm sorry. Even though you were so kind to me.

Even though everyone was kind to me.

At those words, Orietta tenderly swept her hand across Mimizuku's head.

"You know, us girls… we all become idiots when we fall in love," she said with a mischievous smile.

Mimizuku blinked at her words.

"Orietta… was an idiot too?" she asked, wiping her tears. Orietta looked at Mimizuku and let out a chuckle.

"If I wasn't… how could I become such a good-for-nothing wife?"

Mimizuku laughed involuntarily.

"Take this…"

Orietta then pressed a knife into Mimizuku's hand. It had a simple beauty, and with one look, Mimizuku could tell it was valuable.

"Orietta, what's this?"

Mimizuku's shoulders shivered at the cold weight suddenly placed into her hand.

Orietta smiled at her affectionately.

"Take it. I'm lending it to you. It was given to me when I became the Maiden of the Holy sword. It's been passed down through the temple for generations. It was given shape from a broken off piece of the Holy Sword. If you want to cut the threads holding the King of Night down, you'll need this."

"Is it really okay for me to have it?" Mimizuku asked, assailed by mixed emotions.

Wasn't Orietta Ann Duke's wife? Wasn't she a priestess of this country?

Even so, Orietta continued to smile at her.

"I implore that you take it, my dear Mimizuku," she said.

So Mimizuku took the blade.

Pains from the open air seemed to slice through her body, and she began to feel nauseous.

However, she didn't lose her grip.

I will fight.

Up until now, she had always done as others said. She wanted to live for herself now, to give her life direction on her own.

I knew it, the moment we first met.

Meeting you…

It had been the first choice Mimizuku had made in her life.

I'm going to take you back. That's why I'll fight.

Mimizuku prayed to God for the first time.

"Fukurou!!"

Mimizuku cut through the silky thread binding holding Fukurou's body.

"Fukurou, Fukurou, open your eyes!!" she called out, crying. Fukurou's face was calmly beautiful, as if he had died, and Mimizuku's spine froze, not because

of Fukurou's beauty, but because of the fear that he was lost to her.

There were a lot of things Mimizuku couldn't help being afraid of.

Then, slightly, faintly, Fukurou raised his eyelids. Soft moonlight leaked from his eyes.

"Fukurou!"

With his newfound freedom of movement, Fukurou's first action was to grab onto Mimizuku's wrist.

The wrist was slightly discolored, and holding a knife.

"Agh!"

Fukurou's thin fingers had lost much of their vigor, but his grip was still surprisingly strong, causing Mimizuku to drop her knife.

"Mimizuku!!" Ann Duke called out desperately.

Orietta swallowed her breath.

With a dull sound, the knife hit the ground.

However, Fukurou stared at Mimizuku.

"I thought you said… that you hated knives…" he said.

It was the same voice, not changed in the slightest, that Fukurou had spoken with when they had first met.

To his words, Mimizuku smiled.

It was a powerful smile, unlike any one Mimizuku had made before. It radiated from her face, disregarding the single teardrop that had fallen from Mimizuku's eye.

"It's not that important…"

Mimizuku then jumped at Fukurou's neck.

She hugged him tightly. Her delicate, slender arms wrapped around him, as if they were crafted only to embrace him.

Fukurou then narrowed his eyes slightly.

He embraced Mimizuku's body as tightly as he could.

Much time had passed since their chance meeting on that moonlit night. The two finally received each other, arm in arm.

"Andy!!" Dantes called out. Blood vessels were visible on his forehead.

"Holy Knight Ann Duke! Cut down the demon king! The king's life depends on it…!!"

The magicians were also preparing a new spell. Dantes raised his voice, demanding that the Holy Sword be stabbed into Fukurou's heart.

"I don't care if you have to kill Mimizuku as well!!"

At his mighty tone of voice, Ann Duke shook off his wife's hands from his wrists.

Orietta screamed from behind him.

However, Ann Duke did not turn around. He raised the Holy Sword, higher and higher.

Mimizuku closed her eyes tightly.

She didn't care if she died like this, in Fukurou's embrace.

Repeating the same words in her head over and over, even though a contradiction in them stood before her, she continued to repeat them.

"Andy!"

Claudius was the one who called out the name.

The sword fell.

A distinct sound, like shattering glass, arose.

"!!"

A whirlwind seemed to blow through, and everyone in the room lost control over their senses for an instant.

"Ann Duke, what the hell are you—"

A sound like a flowing waterfall could be heard, and the air began to stir.

For a moment, Mimizuku couldn't tell which way was up or down, however her vision eventually began to focus. It had all ended. All that was left in the underground room was Ann Duke, Fukurou, and Mimizuku, still in Fukurou's arms.

Ann Duke had not aimed the blade at Fukurou's heart.

Fukurou's wings, as if taking a deep breath, spread out. He had regained his magic power.

Ann Duke had sliced through the blue burning crystal that held Fukurou's magic power.

"Andy! You…"

The king, who had regained his posture as the magicians at his side supported him, called out the name in a voice brimming with rage.

However, Ann Duke shrugged his shoulders as he always did.

"Sorry, king, but if my wife runs from me, I'll be in trouble," he said indifferently.

His tone was as if he was speaking to an old friend.

"Fukurou, Fukurou, are you okay?" After the sudden discord, Mimizuku had watched Fukurou, worried.

Fukurou did not ignore her; he lowered his gaze to meet Mimizuku's sanpaku eyes.

"Why did you come?" he asked in a low voice.

Mimizuku made a frown that was like a mixture of laughter and crying.

"Why wouldn't I come?"

"Because you finally obtained happiness."

"I did, huh? Warm food, good clothes, soft towels, and a plushy bed. But…" Mimizuku faced the pair of moons. "You weren't there," she said.

Fukurou narrowed his moon eyes.

"You are truly a fool."

"Maybe."

Tears began to drip from Mimizuku's eyes.

"Don't say something so difficult to understand at a time like this. Now that everything's fine, why don't we go home? Let's go home to the forest!"

"…"

Fukurou wiped the tears from Mimizuku's cheek with his clawed, slender fingertips.

"I thought you said you never cried."

"I remembered how." She raised her cheek up. "I remembered how to laugh, too. Do you hate me for becoming so human?"

"No…" Fukurou then combed aside Mimizuku's hair with his finger, so that the symbol on her forehead could be seen. "You… are Mimizuku. And I… am Fukurou."

That was his answer.

Fukurou flapped his outstretched wings, sending a flurry of magic power and wind into the underground room. The gray-haired king raised his voice against the King of Night holding the small girl.

"What are you doing? Magicians! Riveil! Quickly, quickly, do something!!"

However, the magicians were unable to cast any further spells.

With the full moon out, the king of monsters brimmed with power befitting of his name, and, feeling the pressure of his magic power, the magicians could not stop shivering.

"What are you doing!? Quickly, the demon king!!"

"Please, stop this!!" Claudius said to Dantes as he attempted in vain to rouse the magicians. "Please stop, father. No more!"

Held closely by Fukurou's right arm, Mimizuku looked at Claudius.

He had smiled when she asked him for help.

"I'll do whatever you ask, Mii."

She looked at Claudius, the same boy who had said those words to her.

Claudius's face crunched together, as if he was about to cry, still repeating his plea to his father.

"No more, father! I'm fine, so please, stop all of this!"

"Claudius…" Dantes said, taken aback. He looked at Claudius. "Claudius… what are you thinking!?"

"Mii is my friend!" A tear streamed across Claudius's cheek. It was the first time since the death of the queen that Dantes had seen Claudius's tears. "Mimizuku is my friend! If I have to make a friend cry, then it's not worth getting my arms and legs back!"

"Dia…" Mimizuku called out from Fukurou's arms.

However, Claudius turned to face Dantes.

"If you say I can't become king with a body like this, then go find another successor! I don't care! But still, father, still… even though I have this body… I'm still your son!!" he shouted.

He called out for his father, crying. Ann Duke and Orietta stood looking upon the scene before them.

"Claudius…" Dantes called uncertainly.

"Dia!" Mimizuku shouted out from between Fukurou's arms. "Hey, Dia!"

Tears running down his face, Claudius looked back at Mimizuku. Then, he looked up at Fukurou.

"Dia, I'm sorry… I'm sorry." She knew it was a meaningless apology, and that she had relied on him to do something very difficult. But even so, she was happy that he listened to her. "Sorry… and thank you!"

"It's fine, Mii." Claudius smiled, his face still damp with tears. "I received many things from you. I learned from you. So it's fine. Don't worry about it." He gave her a warm smile.

It was a smile that resembled the dead queen's.

Suddenly, a low voice was heard.

"…Young prince."

Whose voice was it? After a split second of confusion, Claudius swallowed his breath, and turned to look up at the owner of the voice.

"King… of Night…"

Fukurou looked down at Claudius with his golden eyes.

"Human prince who wears his limbs as decoration. You may still be able to take the throne with that body."

Mimizuku, surprised at Fukurou's words, looked up at him. Claudius tightened his lips and nodded.

"If my father allows it… No, if I find myself to be suitable for the position, then even with these useless limbs, I will become king of this country."

To the prince's resolute answer, Fukurou flapped his wings several times. He landed in front of Claudius.

"Demon king! What are you doing!?" The king pushed past his magicians, lunging forward. "Don't touch him! What are you doing to my son!?"

Ann Duke raised his sword slightly. Fukurou put Mimizuku down, and gently ran the claws of his long fingers across Claudius's arms and legs.

"!"

Claudius gasped. Strange patterns began to run across his arms and legs, and then a faint light began to shine.

When the light dispersed, something strange happened in Claudius's body.

He shook weakly, and felt weak and cold.

However, he slowly lifted up his right arm.

"Ah…"

Dantes stood up straight, looking wide-eyed at Claudius. Ann Duke stood in a daze, and Orietta covered her mouth as tears began to fall from her eyes.

The magicians were also speechless.

Then, shaking like a newborn fawn, Claudius slowly lifted his legs, and stood up, walking down from his chair.

"K-King of Night, this is… I…"

Claudius, standing, looked up at Fukurou in blank amazement.

Even though he had once thought the King of Night to be fearsome, he had forgotten his fears.

"As a cursed prince, you may have been despised," Fukurou said in a dull, low voice.

"If you are willing to live even with limbs cursed by the demon king, then you should live, human prince."

Claudius opened and closed his fists several times.

Like a dream, he could move.

The brilliant patterns on him could certainly send one who looked upon them into a state of shock.

"Dia!"

With her eyes sparkling, Mimizuku extended both of her arms out to Claudius and hugged him. "Those patterns… they're so pretty!" Mimizuku giggled. "They're all so pretty!"

"Thank you, Mimizuku." Claudius also smiled from the bottom of his heart. With his newly freed

arms, he hugged Mimizuku back. “Thank you as well, King of Night…”

However, Fukurou didn’t seem to hear him. Turning away as if having lost interest, he flew up into the sky. Back to the forest from whence he came.

“Oh! Oooh! Fukurou!” In a panic, Mimizuku tried to grab onto Fukurou. “I’m going too! I’m going back home with you!”

“…”

Not making a sound, Fukurou glared down at Mimizuku.

“If you’re going back, then take me too! You can’t just leave me here; even if you do, I’ll just follow you! The forest isn’t far from here, so don’t try to run away!” Mimizuku said, putting her hands on her hips.

“…”

Fukurou breathed a small sigh, and then turned around, grabbing Mimizuku’s arm.

Mimizuku shrieked with delight.

“Mimizuku!” Ann Duke called out.

"Oh… Andy, Orietta!" She leaned forward from her position in Fukurou's arm. "Hey, hey, hey!"

She felt like there were many things she had to say. Thank you. I'm sorry. Thank you.

Would just those words be enough? Mimizuku thought.

Even thought they had taught her to use them at times like this.

The more she thought about it, the more she felt that they wouldn't be enough.

"Hey! Heeeeyy!"

Tears spread across her face. Why? Why was she so sad? Why was she so regretful? Mimizuku couldn't understand.

Orietta looked at Mimizuku and smiled.

"…You're welcome back anytime," Orietta said, disregarding the tears in her eyes. "I'll be waiting." She smiled compassionately, as she always did.

Beside her, Ann Duke also smiled.

"If life in the forest doesn't suit you, then come right back! We'll go to the market together again!"

Mimizuku made a strained facial expression and nodded rapidly.

There was a comfortable lifestyle, and kind people. But still, she could only make one choice.

To her, the choice was clear.

"King of Night…" The next one to speak was Dantes, standing behind Claudius. The gray-haired king wrinkled his brow as he always did, and made a stern face. "I won't ask you to forgive me, King of Night," he said slowly. "But still…" Dantes took a deep breath. "I thank you, from the bottom of my heart," he declared.

"Father…"

Claudius looked up at his father and gasped.

Fukurou didn't seem interested in responding. He outstretched his wings wide, and turned to disappear into the darkness, but suddenly turned around and faced Dantes.

"If you are a king who chooses his country, then try to build a wonderful country with your own hands."

At that moment, Mimizuku remembered something.

Oh, that's right, Fukurou as well…

Fukurou might have become a human king as well at one time.

Thinking of this, Mimizuku remembered a feeling she couldn't put into words, and clung tightly to Fukurou's neck.

Whenever she couldn't express herself, that was the best thing to do.

Just like Orietta had done for her. Mimizuku felt like she finally understood how to use her own limbs.

Fukurou made an annoyed face at Mimizuku coiling about him, but breathing softly, he gently moved his arms so as to caress Mimizuku's head.

Seeing this, Ann Duke and Orietta looked at each other and laughed.

And then, Mimizuku and Fukurou melted away into the darkness.

A gust blew through, and the next moment, the two had disappeared without leaving a trace.

It was as if a storm had passed through the castle's basement.

"They left…"

Ann Duke sighed.

"Oh well," Orietta smiled, holding out the scabbard of the Holy Sword to Ann Duke.

With a beautiful movement, Ann Duke returned the Holy Sword to its scabbard and gave it to Orietta.

"Well then, we've got a lot of cleaning up to do, don't we?"

"Indeed," Ann Duke simply said.

"You're taking responsibility. Get to work at once, Andy," the gray-haired king said, returning to his usual gloomy tone of voice.

"Huh!? Hey, wait a second! What about you, the king!? Why me!?"

"It's to be expected. Why don't you try working for once? Damned homestay."

Ann Duke drooped his shoulders, and Orietta chuckled beside him.

"Your Majesty…" Claudius said, looking up timidly at the king. "Um…"

He knew he had to be punished, as he had disobeyed the king.

"Dia."

"Y-Yes!?" Claudius answered, his shoulders shaking. His father's gray eyes looked at him. He had a stern face, and an austere light in his eyes. However, Claudius did not look away. He did not cast his eyes down as he had always done before. Pursing his lips tightly, he faced forward, looking straight at Dantes, his father.

He planned to take his punishment gracefully. He had no regrets. Even so, he didn't think he would be hated by his father for it. He simply did what he had to do, for both his own sake, and for the sake of the country.

Dantes looked down at Claudius, and opened his mouth to speak, but he closed it and narrowed his eyes.

He then took a step forward, and tightly embraced Claudius's body.

At his father's sudden action, Claudius's emerald eyes flew wide open.

"Your… Majesty…?"

Dantes did not say anything. He simply hugged his son, his eyes closed tight, and his shoulders slightly quivering.

It was a strong embrace, and it hurt Claudius. He was a hapless old man who didn't know how to be gentle.

However, Claudius closed his eyes.

He had always wanted this.

The hug was instantaneous. The moment that Dantes let go of Claudius, his face turned to that of the stern king.

"From here on, I will teach you many things. If you have the spirit required to be king, then follow me, even if you cough up blood!"

At those words, Claudius's eyes sparkled.

"Yes, father!!"

He was the prince that would one day be called “The Ornate Sealed King.”

Epilogue

Mimizuku and Fukurou

JUST LIKE THE FIRST TIME she had visited, the darkness of the forest whispered and the wind sliced through the air like a scythe.

Mimizuku, who hadn't stepped into the Forest of Night since a while before, thought that something seemed a bit strange. She knew right away what it was. It was the feeling of her steps on the ground. She was wearing shoes.

She wasn't really sure whether it was normal or not for her to wear them.

"What should I do with these shoes? I don't really need them," she sighed loudly to herself. She figured that it should be her that decides what's normal for

her. “I missed this place!” Sucking in the air around the beautiful greenery, Mimizuku outstretched her arms. No matter how much she waved her wrists or ankles around, there was no sound. Not that she had ever disliked the sound. “I feel like we’ve finally come home! Don’t you think so?” Mimizuku said, turning to Fukurou.

She wanted to say so many things to him, that she was sorry his painting burned, to thank him for showing it to her, that he was an idiot for erasing her memory. However, she decided that a lot had happened that night, and she would tell him everything tomorrow.

Tomorrow.

She was happy that there was a tomorrow to look forward to.

“Do you truly consider this place your home?”

The first thing that Fukurou had said to her was something like that. Mimizuku tilted her neck at his words, but then smiled.

"Yeah, I do. This is where I wanted to return, right?" She then stepped closer to Fukurou and looked up at him. His eyes gradually changed to silver. The sky as well soon turned white with the dawn. "If Fukurou wanted to live in the country, with Andy and everyone else, then that's where I would want to go. But you don't want to live there, do you?"

"…"

"I'll go wherever you go! We'll always, always be together!" Mimizuku said brightly.

"…Do you understand?"

"Huh? Understand what?"

Fukurou let out a small breath.

"The meaning of your words. Do you understand them? No matter how long you live, you will never outlive me. You will die, leaving me behind."

"Yeah, that's true, I guess," Mimizuku nodded, smiling. She understood the difference in their lifespans. She knew that they couldn't live eternally together. But still… "Even so, I'll always be by your side." Mimizuku then smiled sympathetically. "I

won't force you to eat me, but… if you let me become a grandma, then I definitely won't taste as good. But if I ever die, then I'll go back to the dirt." Mimizuku looked up at Fukurou's beautiful eyes. "If I ever die, I'll return to the dirt of this forest. I'll turn into dirt, then into a flower, and I'll always be blooming by your side… We'll always, always be together…" she vowed, whispering.

Fukurou gazed at Mimizuku silently for a long time.

"Do as you like," he simply said in a low voice.

With just those words, Mimizuku was happy.

This is what he meant by "allowances," wasn't it?

She finally understood everything that Kuro had said.

Eventually, Fukurou stopped and sat at the roots of a giant tree to rest his large wings.

"Hm? Fukurou, what are you doing?"

"I'm going to sleep for a while."

"Sl-Sleep!? I… I'll sleep too…" Mimizuku decided, rolling up into a ball by Fukurou's side. She be-

came small as she had done long before, but Fukurou's wings acted as cushions for her, and she was able to sleep with similar comfort to the giant bed in the castle.

Mimizuku was very tired, and she slipped away almost as soon as she lay down.

She didn't care if she awoke. If she did, then she would talk to Fukurou about building a new mansion, and making a new painting.

Then, she'd call for Kuro, and everyone would be happy together.

As she thought of these things, she drew closer and closer to the world of sleep.

Just as she was about to fall asleep, she felt Fukurou's wings draw around her like a futon.

It made her incredibly happy.

Maybe it was all a dream, Mimizuku thought.

Author's Word

What Lies Beyond Prayers

I DON'T REALLY HAVE too many memories of submitting novels.

The first time I put my pencil on the paper, my thoughts were with my hand, leaving nothing behind. However, I do know that it was a story about Santa Claus. It was a short story, only about thirty sheets of paper long.

It was probably about halfway through middle school. The results didn't put anything in my chopsticks. However, I found it to be a lot of fun. I didn't know how to properly submit it, so I put it in an envelope and took it to my friend's house.

I remember being surprised when I was told not to put it in a nylon bag.

My friend took me out to the postbox. We took a brown envelope and made our way to the one behind her house. The sun was coming down, and there weren't too many people in the area.

We looked over the package several times, and finally pushed it down the hole. *All right,* I thought, *Let's go home.* Suddenly, my friend pulled the package back up.

"You have to pray!" I was told. I was really shocked. Standing side by side in front of the postbox, we clasped our hands together and quietly prayed.

I wasn't religious, so I didn't know who to pray to. Maybe I was supposed to pray to the editor who might read it, or God, or something else. I simply, silently, prayed.

I haven't prayed when submitting anything since (not counting the time I cried when the person at the post office's late night collection window told me I

had the wrong date on the postmark…), but whenever I submit a novel, I always remember my friend telling me "You have to pray!" And I remember my friend clasping her hands together for the sake of my story.

About all I can do other than write immature stories, other than just write every day, is to pray.

Now, I don't remember how many years it's been, but it seems like the prayers we made that night reached. They reached faster than the light of the stars had taken to reach our hands that night, so I think that's good.

I have said that I want to write simple stories so many times it seems like I'm drunken and feverish. I want to write simple stories. I don't have any interest left in history. It doesn't matter if it's disposable. A checkpoint is fine too. I don't care if it's a story you'll forget when you grow up. That's it, that's all. That's absolutely it. Something that moves the heart. Something like light. Something that will open the world to a child, or someone who thinks books are boring

and difficult, like me. Something like that. Ah, yes. I want to write novels.

I've lived my whole life sighing like that. I need idealism and whitewashing. I don't have the youth to talk back when a smart-faced senior tells me "You can't live your life washed away by ideals," but baring my teeth, I had a dream. Even now, I'm still dreaming.

When I came up with the idea for *Mimizuku and the King of Night,* I was in my third year of high school, and right in the middle of studying for college entrance exams. My heart had suddenly cried out as a story began to overflow from within me. In two days, I had filled half of a college notebook with a setting of a world whose gleam had disappeared, and put it away on my bookshelf. When I entered college, I wrote the story. For my first long novel, I decided to use the concept I came up with in that notebook. College entrance exams were rough, but I would sigh to myself, "It's not that important."

To me, it would be special if someone found this story special. There would be no greater blessing for me than this.

Lots of people have helped me in getting this story out to the world. My friend, who read it before anyone else and loved Mimizuku for me, and then after everything was over told me "congrats," and patted me on the head. There are lots of other friends who have made important appearances for me. If I didn't have them, I probably wouldn't have been able to finish this story.

Since I got the grand prize, I met the supervisor, and lots of other people who have helped me. These people have put in a lot of effort to bring about this book. Since I'm a country girl, when I went to the capital city, I couldn't sleep. Thank you to the judges for starting everything, Isono Hiroo-sensei for wrapping up Mimizuku's world into nice binding, and Arikawa Hiro-sensei for reading and accepting *Mimizuku.* And of course, a huge thank you to all of you, the readers, near and far, that I do not see.

When the prize results first came out, I was told "May your words cast a magic spell on the hearts of young readers" as congratulations by many authors that I respect.

Though I can only cast inexperienced magic.

Looks like all I can do today as well is pray.

– Kougyoku Izuki –

Commentary

Hiro Arikawa

I CONFESS. I CRIED. I lost to this unabashedly strange straightforwardness. Damn it.

To be honest, I was kind of busy when I was asked to write this commentary, so I won't deny I felt a tinge of annoyance.

So in order to finish my obligation as soon as possible, I started reading over the manuscript as soon as it arrived. But what was this? It was quite engrossing.

I felt as though the manuscript was pulling me inside by the sleeves. Yikes, I would have been totally swallowed if I weren't careful. Since I had been asked to write a commentary, I didn't just read through it

arbitrarily, thinking about it from just my perspective.

In a panic, I repositioned my back in my chair, but it kept pulling me back in. Or was it fishing me in? I was the fish and the manuscript was the fishing line. It was some tough line!

After reading the whole thing in one sitting and crying, I somehow managed to pull myself out. I had lost the tug of war. But how could I complain?

It was like a fairy tale composed of simple chapters.

Just like a fairy tale set long, long ago in a faraway land doesn't have much of a detailed setting, there aren't too many details regarding location in this story either.

There's no need for it. It doesn't matter if this story takes place long ago or in a faraway place. It doesn't matter at all.

The story doesn't have a sense of topic, and it might seem a bit lacking, but this is simply the engrossing fairy tale of one Mimizuku.

And then this Mimizuku meets the King of Night, and that is simply the story. They then surround other characters with their story. They are taken by Mimizuku's lovable personality and unable to go free.

For people (and in this story I guess monsters too?), it is very simple and very difficult to be yourself. Some want to change, but struggle and end up changing nothing, while others simply resign themselves.

Before those people appears a small night bird that drops a small piece. It is an insignificant piece that may or may not help them change. The bird drops it without any regard as to whether or not it has meaning, but that is why I think this bird is lovable.

Everyone, please see with your own eyes what occurred the first time that this little bird held a clear, strong will. Or maybe leave it for later.

Please accept the conclusion to this unabashedly strange straightforwardness, as I had. What will jump into your heart is a lovable bird.

If you embrace this bird, you may be able to obtain something special.